DEVELOPING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

by

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Declaration

I certify that:

- except where due acknowledgment has been made, this work is my own;
- the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award;
- the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement of the approved research program.

Signed:

NITA CHERRY DATE

Abstract

This study explores how reflection upon oneself and one's own behaviour assists people - and, in particular, managers - to develop. Reflective techniques are examined in the context of action-learning (Revans, 1980 and Marsick, 1992) and are argued to be a powerful means of creating self-understanding, which in turn creates opportunities for self-directed personal change. Reflective techniques are also examined as a means of developing the personal craft or praxis of those who try to assist the development of managers, and as a technique for use in action research (Lewin, 1946) and the development of collective knowledge. Schon's (1987) concept of the "reflective practitioner" provided a major theoretical foundation for this work.

The study employed action research and action learning methodologies. The researcher spent six years honing her understanding and application of reflective techniques in assisting the development of managers. She also applied self-reflection to the development of her own praxis over that time.

One result of the study has been the enhancement of the practical, reflection-based techniques used by the writer to facilitate the development of managers - and more importantly, offered to them to facilitate their own continuing development. Hopefully, these techniques will be of value to other practitioners in this field. A second outcome has been the review and refinement of some of the theoretical constructs used by this writer and other practitioners and theorists which help to describe and explain the phenomenon of reflection-based behavioural change. A third outcome has been the documentation of a case-study in the application of reflective techniques to the development of personal praxis, tracking the integration of conceptual understanding

and technique.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the rationale, scope, methodology and outcomes of this study. Chapter 2 explores reflection as a technique for research and the development of collective knowledge, and incorporates a review of the relevant literature. Chapters 3 and 5 examine reflection as a tool for learning, drawing on the literature and tracking the development of the researcher's own understanding. Chapter 4 describes how the researcher learned to use reflective learning techniques when working with others and follows the gradual integration of her understanding with her practice. Chapter 6 summarises and reflects upon both the processes and the outcomes of the research.

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Prologue

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot
"Little Gidding. The Four Quartets," 1943, p38

The experience of writing a thesis is a very personal and private one – each one "unique" in the twists and turns of its creation, as well as in the end product offered to the world. From my own experience in writing two theses, and helping many other people to produce theirs, I've noticed two very different phases – times when thinking

and writing become almost an obsession, something that can't be left alone until that "bit" is "done"; and times when the thought, let alone the art, of thinking and writing is pushed away – either from boredom or because it has become "too hard." There are, of course, some "in-between" phases when one writes steadily and methodically without either great excitement or boredom – it becomes another job of work, to be carried out with detached interest.

In one or other of these phases – for me, it was an "obsessive" phase – the writer is suddenly confronted with the question: what am I really writing about? What is the key issue or question I'm investigating? In the kind of action research (Lewin, 1946) described in this thesis, this is perhaps more likely to happen than in others – particularly those devoted to testing a specific hypothesis.

To have that question intrude itself again and again, is very much part of the action research methodology, since as a method of investigation it asks that a theory or invention or plan be checked against experience, and that experience be informed and enriched by theory and planning.

What is truly disconcerting is to think that one is more or less "on track" with a research design and then discover that what is being "found out" is really quite different from what you thought you were doing. I usually say as much to students at the start of the academic year: "You may think you are investigating and implementing a strategy for improving customer service and discover that you are really engaged in the management of internal politics and a personal fight for survival."

How often do we give to other people the advice we most need to take ourselves? At several times in the last four or five years, my confidence in the integrity and quality of my work as a practitioner, let alone as a researcher, has been severely shaken by experiences which have left me saying to myself: "I don't know what I'm doing; I

shouldn't be let loose with people until I've worked this out; I'm not equal to the task."

The act of writing the narrative of the thesis has itself triggered some of these crises of confidence – when I became aware that what I was wrestling with something that was much bigger or harder than anything I imagined at the beginning, which I could only catch elusive glimpses of and which was both exhilarating and frustrating at the same time.

It would be honest to say that I didn't really know what I was "on" about until the last few months during the final writing stages. Again, I had neglected the advice – so often given to others – that there is an "inner" and an "outer" journey to be taken in action research. By the "outer" journey I mean the task or intervention or piece of work being done by the practitioner – whether manager, change-agent or researcher. By the "inner" journey I mean the discovery of how the practitioner operates to achieve that task – not just the strategies and techniques used, but the skills, and qualities and "mental models" (Argyris & Schon, 1978) which make up and guide an individual's behaviour and the way they practice their craft.

One of my graduate students (Percy, 1993) expressed this idea in the notion of the "layers of work" to be done in the course of action research. Her layers of the work include:

- the day-to-day work undertaken by the change-agent and others in the external world: the plans made, meetings attended, reports written, techniques and strategies used to get things done and make things happen;

- the work of understanding the multiple – and sometimes contradictory or paradoxical – perceptions of that work by the players involved;

- the work of using those contradictions and paradoxes to illuminate, guide and refine what is undertaken in the external world by the change-agent and others;

- the work of building knowledge, understanding – and even theory – which can enhance and enrich the future practice of the change-agent.

This is a useful way of describing the many different levels of work which action research encompasses.

For the research student, a key challenge is to understand when one is undertaking the different kinds of work, and to recognize the tensions and opportunities which arise as the different kinds of work mingle and at times "collide" with one another.

For me, an early collision came with the recognition that the methodologies used to "research my topic" were themselves the subject of the research. My thesis topic – one aspect of how managers learn – has been primarily about the use of action research and learning methodologies. So in practice, action research and learning methodologies were being used to study action research and learning methodologies.

It is the nature of action research to accomplish something for a client, to enhance understanding and knowledge of what has happened and develop the capacity of both client and researcher to do "it" – or something like it – again in the future (Rapaport, 1970). As a result of engaging in action research, the practice changes.

Over time, in the course of this work, the way I practise my craft has changed and so, inevitably, has my research methodology.

This happened slowly, on a day-to-day and month-to-month basis; there was no obvious or deafening "collision" to alert me to the fact until one of the periodic "times of

reckoning" which were built into the research design arrived – a time (scheduled every 6 months) for production of a narrative which would assess and integrate the work done over the preceding months. This particular "time of reckoning" occurred after four years of work had been undertaken. It became startlingly obvious that the research methodology had developed substantially – in parallel with changes in my practice. The production of a narrative as a research methodology (Yin, 1987) had become increasingly important to me, just as narrative and story-telling had become important in my day-to-day work and practice.

My supervisor was as disconcerted as I was, since at that stage neither of us had seriously explored the literature on biography and story-telling as methods of reflection in research. It felt to me as though I had been confidently walking along a path, putting one step firmly and easily in front of another, and then had suddenly looked down and seen that I was in fact walking along a very narrow track, with a sheer drop to the rocks many hundreds of feet below. That is a somewhat hackneyed image, but it very accurately conveys the experience I had – a dizzying sensation that what I and my supervisor thought I had been doing had become something very different. I do not mean that I had abandoned my original research design and the techniques that I had chosen to use – but that they had become gradually transformed as I worked with them, and I had not realised how much they had changed until I looked closely at the "before" and "after" photographs (to switch metaphors).

As Percy (1993) would have put it, part of "the real work" had only just become clear to me – that I had to acknowledge and take responsibility for "re-inventing" my research methodology, along with my practice.

In addition to the use being made of narrative, just described, that also meant acknowledging that the subject of this research has really been myself – albeit, myself at work with others. It is the story of the development of some central features

of my own practice – those that have to do with helping people to use reflection to enhance self-understanding and through that to effect behavioural change.

The development of self-understanding is indeed "real work" for most of us. The development of techniques which can enhance this kind of self-understanding have occupied the minds of psychologists, philosophers, theologians and social-workers – among others – for generations. I have taken a fraction of that work and tried to use it to enhance the set of techniques which I use in my own practice. In doing so, and with the help of colleagues and clients, I have developed some techniques of my own – things which I have tried to perfect by submitting them to the rigours of day-to-day usage, sometimes as an academic educator, but most frequently in the commercial market place as a consultant.

In developing the techniques, I also refined my constructs about why and how they work. Again, this conceptual development is something that evolved gradually, without my being conscious that I was doing it until some way down the path. So this thesis also tells the story of how that happened, in the context of action research.

Turner (1989) in a wonderful little book called *The Way of the Thesis* has compared a dissertation to a piece of stout rope. One should be able to pull on the rope at any point and find that it doesn't come away in one's hand – that it is an integral part of the whole. The central task of the thesis writer is to discover what the "whole" is – and to weave a stout rope in which each strand is closely intertwined and connected. My rope, my "contention" if you like, is that through self-reflection it is possible to attain understanding which frees us to act in ways that are different from our previous ways of acting – in other words, to learn. As a corollary to this, I contend that the act of self-understanding is a creative one – we "invent" ourselves, as well as discovering or "finding" ourselves. This can be paradoxical in exactly the way that T.S. Eliot's words – quoted at the beginning – are paradoxical. In the act of re-invention, of starting anew,

we may find that we are finally re-discovering what was there all the time.

To facilitate the development of self-understanding in another person is also to engage in an act of creation. Similarly, to engage in action research is to engage in a sustained creative effort, as well as to "discover" something. The discovery and creation of meaning or understanding through reflection are explored in this thesis from three perspectives: as a technique for research and the development of collective knowledge (Chapter 2); as an avenue for personal change and learning (Chapter 3); and as a means of developing one's professional craft or practice (Chapters 4 and 5).

These three facets of exploration – which was undertaken through the vehicles of action learning (Revans, 1980) and action research (Levin, 1946) – had three related outcomes:

- the review and refinement of some of the theoretical constructs used by this writer and other practitioners and theorists which help to describe and explain the phenomenon of reflection-based learning;

- the enhancement of the practical, reflection-based techniques used by this writer to facilitate the development of managers;

- the documentation of a case-study in which reflective techniques were themselves applied by the writer to the development of her personal praxis as she attempted to integrate her conceptual understanding and practical application of reflection.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

The starting point

This project began with a series of questions which were asked by a "management educator" – someone who saw herself having a role to play in the development of adult managers.

That person – the present writer – had worked with many managers at all levels in both the private and the public sectors in Australia over a twenty year period. As a result of these experiences – which included managing other managers, consulting to managers and taking on the role of trainer and educator – there were many obvious questions to be asked.

One of the most central was:

- How can adults – and particularly managers – be effectively helped when they seriously consider changing their behaviour and attempting to do things or think about things in new or modified ways?

This is not a new question, nor is it particular to the development of managers. Since people have been capable of reflecting about themselves and others, they have asked related questions: "How do I get them interested in learning this?", "How do I teach this skill?", "How can I best lead this organisation toward the achievement of a new vision?", "What will it take to make him change his ways?", "How will we change the culture in this organisation?", "What would it take to get this team really firing?", "How can I help her deal with this self-defeating behaviour?"

The business of somehow getting people to change their behaviour preoccupies

teachers, spouses, parents, dietitians, doctors, therapists, consultants, ministers of religion, basketball coaches and aspiring golfers, to mention but a few.

The scale of change can range from the redirection and repositioning of a major business, the development of a nation, the curing of alcoholism or the saving of a marriage, to taking up a hobby or learning to drive.

Developing the skills and behaviour of adult managers poses some particular challenges. What does it take to get a competent and experienced manager to consider doing something differently? Most have already developed *characteristic ways of doing things* – defined here as sets of practised skills and habits which are automatically brought into play to deal with the situations and issues they find themselves dealing with at work. Some of these will have been consciously and deliberately learned; others will reflect the slow incremental accumulation of day-to-day routine, barely acknowledged or reflected upon. But simple observation affirms that most adult managers either "do what comes naturally" or "lead with their strengths" – the tried and true repertoire that works.

All that is perfectly understandable – after all, why experiment for the sake of it, even if one had the time? It makes sense that when we are on a good thing, we stick to it.

But, the questions remain – under what circumstances do managers think about doing things differently? and how do other people hinder and help them when they try? How, for that matter, do they help and hinder themselves?

<u>The scope and rationale of the project</u>

As the project unfolded, the initial line of inquiry created so many possibilities for reading, thinking and practice that it had eventually to be contained and focused. The

disciplines of management, education and psychology are all relevant and important, and all offer many models, theories and concepts which try to describe and explain the processes through which adults learn and change their behaviour. This made the literature review enormous in its potential.

The managers, consultants and academics with whom the present writer worked did not limit themselves even to those possibilities. The fields of economics, religion, literature, art and psychiatry had all been seminal in the language and concepts they used to describe and explain their experiences and ideas.

As the writer listened to and worked with others, it became important not just to understand the words and ideas, but also the beliefs that lay behind them. Each carried around a set of what Argyris and Schon (1978) call implicit theories – sometimes acknowledged and articulated, often not – which they used to make sense of their experience, and sometimes as a basis for taking action.

These individuals were involved in taking many actions designed to influence the behaviour of others: creating goals and strategies to focus and guide the efforts and activities of large and small groups; developing strategies to fundamentally change the work practices and behaviours of people at work; finding ways to improve personal productivity; and helping people to plan and manage their own learning, as well as the learning and development of their own teams.

Having read and heard the words of others, the essential issues for the writer's own behaviour as a practitioner were more sharply and richly defined. Her own implicit beliefs and theories had first to be articulated and acknowledged, next to be tested and then modified, extended or discarded.

There are many different questions and issues with which one is confronted if one

thinks seriously about the actions one takes in attempting the development of managers: must an experienced manager be "ready" to learn or change, before I or anybody else can hope to help them learn or change? how would I or they be able to recognise their "readiness"? behavioural change be accelerated *significantly* by anything I do or say? how? how – if at all – is its quality and depth significantly improved or otherwise altered by my interventions? what blocks or inhibits learning and behavioural change? how do I recognise and help to deal with those blocks, including the ones that come from within the person, or from within myself?

All of these questions, one way or another, are ways of asking other, more fundamental questions: why do we do what we do? does it work? and why does it work?

These may be seemingly obvious questions for a practitioner in the field of management consultancy and development – or, for adult educators in any field, be it engineering, medicine or social work. While they may be obvious, they are some of the questions which this writer continues to find challenging, as do most of her colleagues and – judging by the management development literature – many others practising and writing in this field. Unlike primary and secondary school teachers, who are perforce exposed to theories of child development and educational practice, consultants and academics are not necessarily acquainted with theories of how people learn, or even with the basic techniques which might be covered in "trainer training". In the field of management, it is quite possible to "teach" management theory and practice without thinking too much about how managers, in practice, learn to be good managers, or bad ones.

Many of those encountered during the course of this research had, in fact, thought about these questions a good deal, but still found it difficult to articulate their thinking. Most, in fact, described their thinking as still evolving and themselves as still being in search of the answers. All acknowledged that the issues have important practical implications, given that the capacity to continuously learn and change is perhaps the only thing which

gives organisations and individuals a sustained competitive edge in a constantly changing and increasingly complex world.

It is also of practical importance given the sustained interest in management education in this country as in others. The challenge to "get it right" continues to confront us, no less than it did ten years ago when Hayes and Abernathy (1980) published their landmark critique of business schools entitled "Managing Our Way to Economic Decline". Their central observation was that an obsession with technique – without the development of wisdom which drives and harnesses technique effectively – produces graduates of business schools who are not equipped to cope with, let alone lead others through, the kind of economic and technological change which confronts individuals and organisations at this time in our history.

While it can be interesting and stimulating to produce debate for debate's sake, the whole subject of enhancing adult learning – and particularly the learning of adult managers – is not one that falls into that category, or into the "nice to know" category. This writer would argue that the capacity to effectively manage and enhance learning is one of the critical success factors which makes or breaks both individuals and organisations. At the close of the twentieth century, given the power of what Freed (1993) has called "relentless innovation" as a source of global competitiveness, it also has the capacity to make or break nations.

Closer to home the writer – and her academic colleagues – had another reason for being interested in the answers to these questions. For some years, the Faculty of Business at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – and in particular, its Department of Management – has offered graduate courses which take Malcolm Knowles' (1978) concept of the adult learner very seriously, using action research and learning concepts as the fundamental tools of management development (see Prideaux & Ford, 1988). As indicated in the prologue, this project involved using the Department's "own" research

and learning methodologies to investigate and hopefully enrich the application of those same methodologies. For the life of the project – and very likely beyond it – the writer has tried to use the techniques she offers – and at times imposes – on her students and clients, particularly techniques for reflecting on experience. Like her colleagues, she had a profound interest in finding out whether and how they work, and how they might be made to work even more effectively.

Specifically this writer became very interested in understanding how and why reflection helps the learning process; in developing and refining practical reflection techniques which she and others could use to enhance their learning; and in using reflection to enhance the *integration* of her understanding with her practice. These are the central themes of this thesis.

Methodology

The research strategy being employed is a variation of the action research methodology introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1946, as a way of combining action – especially the achievement of social and organisational change – with the generation of knowledge and theory.

The process of action research can be described as a cycle of planning, action, and review of the action, resulting in other continuing and iterative cycles of planning, action and review. It incorporates both inductive and deductive methods of reasoning and logical analysis, and is undertaken in company with others who have a stakeholding or interest in the outcome – clients, sometimes colleagues, sometimes host organisations or communities.

During the action research cycle, experience is continually re-cycled; earlier experiences and data are re-visited in the light of accumulated data; new action is

planned in the light of what went on before, and all experiences are systematically reviewed and evaluated.

Susman and Evered (1978) suggest that this is a particularly appropriate form of research when the unit of analysis is, like the researcher, a self-reflecting subject (that is, a person); when understanding of the phenomenon under investigation cannot be developed without the active co-operation of the subject; and when central research questions issues are themselves likely to be fully defined only by sustained exposure to and involvement with the subject over a long period of time.

Key elements of the research, which are explored in more detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis, were:

- planned and unplanned dialogue with others (colleagues, clients and students);

- review and integration of a significant body of literature on the use of reflection in action research and action learning;

- the documentation of a case-study in the application of self reflective techniques to the development of one's own praxis, where the researcher is the subject of the research.

From the very beginning of the study, the writer has been aware of a pre-occupation with methodology which has never "gone away". This was initially because of a self-consciousness in using action research methodology at Doctoral level – a self-consciousness very nicely acknowledged – and administered to! – by Bob Dick (1992) in his book *You Want to Do an Action Research Thesis?*

The methodology chapter in this thesis is quite long – not because it spends a lot of time justifying the methodology, but because the research itself generated a great many

questions and issues about research methodology. This is understandable, in retrospect, given that action research and learning were being used to explore action research and learning. The questions being asked by the practitioners were not just questions about how to do things (in this case, how to learn) but questions about how we generate understanding; whether knowledge – including knowledge of oneself – is created or discovered. These are the great questions of ontology (the nature of "reality") and epistemology (the methods for understanding or "knowing" reality).

These questions are of interest in their own right and arguably should be thoroughly explored by anyone who presumes to call themselves a researcher, no matter what their discipline or research subject. But in this project, the issues were of fundamental interest, because the research started to focus on very particular concerns:

- how and why does reflection help us to develop our understanding of ourselves in ways that help us to learn?

- what practical reflective techniques work?

- how do our tacit or implicit "theories" about ourselves guide our behaviour, and does it help to make implicit theories (Argyris & Schon, 1978) explicit?

- how can the practitioner – the educator or facilitator of learning in others – use reflection to understand and develop his or her own practice, with its suite of acknowledged and unacknowledged "theories", and to effectively integrate those theories with practice?

- and how does the researcher tap into, make use of, test and perhaps refine the stock of existing theory and knowledge?

The methodological challenges involved in studying any aspect of human behaviour are immense. Even the most casual glance at the history of contemporary psychology alerts one to the great debates that have raged – and continue to rage – over what is "acceptable" methodology. Georgi (1993, p3) has very elegantly described what he calls the "ultimate contradiction" which has been a major product of this debate: "mainstream" psychological research retains its commitment to a theoretical model and research strategy which in principle excludes the phenomenon of consciousness and uses it to study persons with consciousness. Action research was selected for this project primarily because, in the perception of the writer, it does justice to the complexity and nature of the subject being explored.

The selection of a research methodology is not the first methodological issue which confronts the researcher. The selection of a topic is an "ontological action" – so this writer had already raised some serious methodological issues in defining "how managers learn" as her broad sphere of interest, in her declared interest in "adult learning" and "action learning" – even in the way she had defined learning. The first "knowledge question" which confronts the researcher is not always acknowledged and it is not just *what* are you interested in studying but *why?* If asked, the question is often answered with a general statement of rationale (such as was offered earlier in this chapter) but as a knowledge question (an ontological question) the real question is: why are *you*, at this point in time, interested in this question, and what are the ideas and assumptions (implicit and explicit) that you bring to your work on it? Chapter 4 tries to answer that question by locating the researcher in time and place and making her biases and assumptions explicit.

Chapter 2 is long because it also describes the specific techniques and methods used to generate experience, collect data, reflect on it, interpret and analyse it, and plan further action. It would be usual to spend some time in a methodology chapter describing the research tools used because they powerfully influence what is discovered and created,

and the rigour with which this is done.

For the action researcher, selecting the tools carefully, and using them "knowingly" and keeping them finely honed is particularly important – because the researcher's own behaviour and practice becomes the subject of research. One is examining oneself – as well as others – in action, and the effectiveness of that action. The researcher is also examining the knowledge, theories, ideas and assumptions that generated his or her own behaviour – and possibly the behaviour of others, and exploring the need to extend or change them. The tools of action research must be kept in good order at all times, if they are to withstand the inner and outer journeys described in the prologue, and the "layers of work" identified by Percy (1993). In this particular piece of action research, the development of elements of the researcher's praxis quite explicitly became the subject of sustained reflection.

But again, this part of the thesis has taken longer than is perhaps usual because in this case, the research tools are also the tools of trade of the practitioner. The techniques used for research in this case are precisely the tools used to help people manage their own learning. Tools for generating and planning experience and for reflecting on that experience are the stock-in-trade of the writer. To see and use the same tools for research meant holding them up to the light and examining – and appreciating them – from a different perspective. The writer had to consider their epistemological significance – and it took a long time! However, it was also important, as a direct product of the project, to write down the result of that examination. Chapter 2 is the place in the thesis where that happens.

The sources of the data

Over a five year period, the writer both discovered and created a huge volume of

qualitative data, drawn from day-to-day experience; both planned and unplanned; from some deliberately constructed interventions; and from a continuing program of literature review.

The major data are the researcher's own experiences in consulting to organisations and individual managers; managing the Master of Business in Management for the Faculty of Business at the RMIT and supervising Master's candidates in the same program. These data have been created and evaluated through the process of action research, with particular emphasis on the use of "action-reflection" learning (Marsick et al, 1992). Using this method, the social researcher is behaving like a scientist at the bench, actively engaged in observing phenomenon, recording and reflecting upon what has been observed, experimenting with and adjusting the interventions made and subjecting the results of these interventions to repeated cycles of observation and analysis, including systematic feedback from and evaluation by others.

The second major source of data – analysed in the same way – was a series of ongoing co-operative practice and inquiry sessions with academic staff in the Faculty of Business at the RMIT and with colleagues working as private practitioners in the field of management development. These have been used to explore the way in which the researcher developed her understanding and use of reflection as a way of facilitating learning, and her "theory" about how and why those techniques work.

The final source of data has been the review of literature relating to the application of reflection in action research and action learning.

Since action research focuses on "real life", it has the capacity to generate a quantity of data that can be overwhelming. In the course of this research program, the writer undertook consultancy work with three hundred and eighteen different organisations and groups, including contact with approximately three and a half thousand individuals.

She conducted eighty classes for thirty seven candidates for the Master of Business in Management – each of whom was undertaking an action research program of twelve months' duration. She personally supervised twelve of these candidates. She had dozens of conversations – planned and unplanned – with academic and consultant colleagues, and planned interviews with managers about their learning experiences.

Chapter 2 (the chapter on methodology) describes in more detail how these data were created, accessed, recorded and analysed. In Chapter 4, the data themselves are described – in other words, the writer tells the story, in the first person, of how she learned and how her praxis – both theory and practice was developed.

The literature

The literature was used in a number of ways during this study. A common way to tackle it is to attempt to become an expert in the particular subject being studied. Since the potentially relevant literature was enormous, the writer cannot claim to have become an expert on all of it. She approached the literature with the mental set that it could help in two ways:

- as a guide to action; taking the advice of other people who have already thought about the subject and tried to take useful action themselves;

- as a way of making sense of the researcher's own experience: using the ideas and concepts developed by others to help interpret the experiences and data generated through the project.

In the event, encounters with the literature provided a powerful stimulant to developing both her conceptual understanding and her practice. This thesis makes very significant use of the literature and it needs to be emphasised that the reading of the literature and

the reviewing of, and writing about that literature, was as important in the development of this writer's praxis as the practical experience of "doing" things.

A powerful result of systematically reading the literature – particularly in a field such as adult learning which is being added to weekly – can be to force individuals to put their own efforts and understanding in context, to locate themselves and the work on the current knowledge map. The writer's own experience as practitioner and investigator was – and continues to be – that of "picking up pebbles on the beach of knowledge" and being aware of just how vast and uncontainable the beach seems to be.

The course of the literature review (contained in Chapters 2, 3 and 5) both reflected and directed the action research program. It took two parallel courses. One was the review of literature relating to methodology, which has already been outlined, and which is contained in Chapter 2. The focus there is on reflection as a technique for research and the development of collective knowledge. The second course of the literature, contained in Chapters 3 and 5, is on reflection as a technique to assist learning – both one's own learning and that of others. It begins with a review of the implication for organisational and individual learning of the so-called age of discontinuity and information (Drucker, 1969). The literature on adult learning has been added to considerably since Knowles (1978) wrote his land-mark book, while the literature on organisational learning continues to grow at a very great rate. Much of the literature reinforces the importance of learning as a capability, both for individuals and organisations (for example, Senge, 1990) and explores some of the ways in which this learning might be facilitated.

However, as already indicated, this writer was becoming increasingly interested in a particular aspect of adult learning. The questions and issues were increasingly about how individuals change themselves; about what's going on when an adult tries to use self-understanding as a tool for learning and change; how self-understanding is created;

how meaning is applied to one's experiences of oneself. This led to the writer re-visiting the psychological literature on counselling as a means of behavioural change – particularly the work of Carl Rogers (1961), Robert Carkhuff (1989) and the Gestalt school (for example, Goodman et al, 1972).

Seen from this perspective – and as signalled earlier – the creation of meaning is both a learning issue and a research issue. As a result, a great deal of reading was undertaken in the literature on research methodologies – particularly that part of the literature which acknowledges the creation of personal meaning as an element in research (for example, Morgan, 1983) and explores the "management" of subjectivity as part of the inquiry process (for example, Reason, 1988).

Intertwined with this was reading on the ways in which we construct and access "implicit themes" (Argyris & Schon, 1978) and "defensive routines" (Argyris, 1990) as a means of learning. Also of relevance was Gendlin's (1970) work on the mechanisms through which the application of words to capture human experience actually changes that experience in therapeutic and counselling interventions.

This line of thinking eventually led to the literature concerned with story-telling, story-writing, biography and auto-biography (for example, Jones, 1983; Hankiss, 1981; and Ferrarotti, 1981), as tools for developing personal meaning as well as collective wisdom. It "ended" (at the time of writing) in the work of the Jungian tradition in the exploration of myths and archetypical stories as sources of self-understanding (for example, Estes, 1992).

In the course of a very diverse program of reading – often stimulated and driven as much by the interests of my colleagues as by my own "planned" reading schedule – the work of Donald Schon on *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987) stood out as somehow capturing the essence or "the heart" of the issue for this writer. Schon

explores the facilitation of adult learning through what he calls "reflection-in-action" – a dialogue between facilitator and learner, in which the learner experiments, takes action, reflects (both alone and in dialogue with the facilitator) and submits reflection to further experience. He suggests that the skilled behaviour which we associate with the arts, with craft industries and with the traditional professions cannot be "taught" in a literal sense. The dialogue is not about prescription or rule-giving, but it is about creating or crafting something which emerges gradually, individualistically and on the basis of extensive and disciplined practice. It is not about one person simply handing to another a blue-print or vision of effective performance. The vision – if it exists – is often difficult to articulate, let alone to share or prescribe. The discipline is that of reflection, close attention to the experience, the "doing" and the remembering.

Schon's examples – which also serve as metaphors – are the "Master Class" in musical performance, the architectural studio and the Master craftsman. The notion of craft brings together the paradigms of science, the arts and of sporting achievement: the basic training in rules, techniques, laws, procedures, theorems and formulae; the patient and determined repetition and continued practice, transformed into art by the wisdom which knows when to abandon or modify or stick to the rules; and the instinct which takes over the process and makes it truly the expression of an individual, not just the product of a mass-production assembly line.

When applied to the development of management skill, this metaphor has considerable power. The notion of management as a craft has been explored by Mintzberg (1987) in another context. In his thinking, as in Schon's, the central concept is that of something which emerges – which is literally crafted – from the overlay of experience or intentions, from the ability to take the clay of "raw" data from the past and present and use it to advantage for learning and gradually shaping the future; working carefully with what is, while nurturing and shaping the possibilities for what might be.

Mintzberg was writing of organisations, not just of individuals, and reflecting on the processes of organisational and strategic planning when he wrote:

> As Kierkegaard once observed, life is lived forward but understood backward. Managers may have to live strategy in the future, but they must understand it through the past.
>
> Like potters at the wheel, organisations must make sense of the past if they hope to manage the future. Only by coming to understand the patterns that form in their own behaviour do they get to know their capabilities and their potential. This crafting strategy, like managing craft, requires a natural synthesis of the future, present and the past (Mintzberg, 1987, p75).

The outcomes

Chapter 6 summarises the major outcomes of the study, which were:

- significant development in the reflective techniques offered by the writer to others as a means of developing self-understanding, and used on and by herself for the same purpose; the techniques developed include the development of a "diagnostic map" and the identification of "personal scripts", supported by the use of listening skills, story-telling, story-writing, metaphor construction and journal work;

- refinement of the constructs used by the writer to understand how self-directed behavioural change can be assisted by the use of reflective techniques;

- effective integration of both her techniques and her constructs to form an articulated praxis, as attested by the evaluations of self and others.

The concepts used to explain how techniques work involve application of Gestalt notions of psycho-dynamic change (Goodman et al, 1972). A key concept takes the form of a paradox: the contention that self-directed behavioural change is likely to be

enhanced when we seek not to change ourselves but to simply gain insight into and respect for what already exists. Put simply: we can change only when we are truly ourselves. Perls (1969) has suggested that most attempts at self-improvement are futile, because in trying to improve, the person is focussing on a Gestalt about "trying" that will never be finished. When the person stops attempting to improve or change, and allows him or herself to be exactly what he or she is, the way is open to confront unfinished Gestalten. Perls took the view that the only way unfinished Gestalten may be completed is by affirming the truth, no matter what it is.

The Gestalt therapist observes the person as he or she describes the problem or issue, looking for the underlying process by which the person is maintaining whatever inner state of anxiety, confusion, depression or conflict which is blocking behavioural change. The acts of *attending* and *listening* by the helper-practitioner are important in revealing what the person is actually doing – and may be as important, or more important, that what they are saying.

The work of Gendlin (1970) has also been very seminal in the development of the present writer's thinking. He offers a framework which brings together a number of ideas: the power of the act of attending to another; the paradox of change already described: that to "move on" in understanding one must first "go in" to self and experience; the concept of leverage (small subtle shifts in thought or action which have high impact on self and others); the importance of reflection itself as a way of transforming tacit "knowingness" into explicit, articulated understanding; and the value of metaphor in achieving the latter.

The "leap" made by this writer is that these concepts are not only applicable in the therapeutic situation, but potentially in any situation where self-directed behavioural change is being attempted. At the very least, they help to explain why reflective techniques work. At best, they suggest how these techniques can be extended and

refined in their application.

As well as the refinement of techniques and concepts, this writer has attempted to integrate personal technique and theory into her praxis. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines praxis as "accepted practice, custom; set of examples for practice", and its derivation from a Greek word for "doing". It is a term used in some professions – such as social work – to describe a set of practices or customs prescribed and endorsed by the whole profession or by specialisations and sub-groups within it.

The present writer has defined praxis as the integration of opportunities and chances for action based on the surfacing of and acknowledgment of individual and collective ways of thinking and behaviour. In simple terms, praxis is what results when action is informed and enriched by asking the question: why am I doing what I'm doing? why do I think this will be appropriate or effective?

Revans (1982, p493) has this to say about what he calls "the science of praxeology":

> The science of praxeology – or the theory of practice – remains among the underdeveloped regions of the academic world. And yet it is, or should be, the queen of all, settling the ancient argument about the relative natures of nominalism and realism, bringing Plato, St Dominic and Descartes into the same camp as Aristotle, St Francis and Locke. For successful theory is merely that which enables him who is suitably armed to carry through successful practice. This is the argument of the pragmatists, William James, John Dewey and even Karl Marx: to understand an idea one must be able to apply it in practice, and to understand a situation one must be able to change it. Verbal description is not command enough. It is from consistently replicated and successful practice that is distilled and concentrated on the knowledge we describe as successful theory.

It is probably already evident that the work of Schon (1987) and Mintzberg (1987) fired this writer's imagination very vividly, given the metaphors they use to elaborate the way in which praxis is developed. In Chapter 3 Schon's approach to the development of praxis is explored in some detail.

For the writer, the pursuit of a praxis which would be endorsed and adhered to by the whole profession of management consultants and educators seemed ambitious and presumptuous. However, she did want to clarify the practices and customs which, over the years, she had come to endorse as being appropriate for her. And she wanted to go further and try to articulate the principles which drive those practices and customs.

The first thing was to acknowledge and clearly articulate why this practitioner does what she does – what drives her to select one technique rather than another in facilitating the development in others. In surfacing and naming what can otherwise be habitual, unconscious or instinctive behaviour, the practitioner takes greater conscious responsibility for what is done with, for or to clients and what clients are able to do with, for and to her.

The second was to face a systematic examination of the gap between the theory or idea which is espoused by the practitioner and the theory-in-use – the actual behaviour which she practices (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Gaps of this kind may be more apparent to others than to the practitioner and be a source of confusion for both – since the other may be taken by surprise by the discrepancy and the practitioner may be bewildered when the impacts of her own behaviour do not match the ideas and ideals which she thought drove them. To achieve total consistency between the espoused theory and the theory- in-use might well be a goal that is forever just out of reach, but it made – and continues to make – sense to try.

A third reason was to throw light on experience which is confusing and on problems which don't seem to have obvious answers. Sometimes that confusion or that problematic experience is the direct result of the way we think about people and issues, the assumptions we make about them and the way we behave toward them. Morgan (1983) has observed that in research, as in life, we "meet ourselves". The practitioner, no less than the researcher, contributes to the creation of his or her professional

experience. When experience – which we have generated by our own actions – jumps up and bites us in unexpected ways, we may experience what Argyris and Schon (1978) have called a "dilemma of effectiveness". This happens when our "theories" (which we might or might not have articulated to ourselves and others) fail because they have failed to effectively predict or influence the behaviour of other people.

A fourth reason for doing this was to provide guides for action – to be able to offer cues to oneself, particularly in difficult situations, that might offer sign-posts or at least options as to what to do next. And to be able to give clear messages about what is being proposed or has been done, and why.

A fifth reason was to be able to offer something which would be helpful in guiding others – students and clients who wanted not just to have things done to them but to be able to do those things for themselves, long after the teacher or consultant had gone.

Closely related to the previous two, a sixth reason was to use experience and practice to refine the practitioner's understanding and theory, and to use theory and understanding – her own and other people's – to inform and enrich her practice. The outcome, hopefully, was the refinement of both theory and practice in ways that will be useful to others.

All this might seem at odds with Schon's metaphor of the craft, and the vision which is often difficult to articulate, let alone share or describe. In fact, it was not with the intention of finding a definitive or prescriptive blue-print for performance – her own or anybody else's – that the attempt at clarification of the praxis was made. Indeed, it became clear to the writer that a praxis can become a prison if it is used to limit rather than enlighten the choices available; and if, to draw on Schon again, instinct is not allowed to combine with disciplined and well-learned technique.

It was started more in the manner of a "stock-take" – a labelling and counting over of the concepts and techniques used and the experiences generated by them. The counting over led to re-arranging and the re-discovery of things once known and used but now sitting forgotten at the back of a cupboard. As time went on, the metaphor which became more appropriate was that of polishing spectacles or clearing the mist from the windscreen – trying to see more clearly what was happening and why. It was as though, having labelled all the obvious things, the search shifted to what was less obvious. The writer started to ask more searching questions about why she does the things she does.

After many attempts at vigorous, focused rubbing on the glass the metaphor was changed again.

Marion Milner has written: "Life is not just the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know" (Milner, 1936). This process of slow revelation is very different from the sudden blinding flash of insight or inspiration which one sometimes prays for in a moment of crisis. A more delicate metaphor perhaps captures what happened next: it was like discerning the fragile outline of a pattern seen through trembling water, of glimpsing shapes and connections and meanings, half recognising and remembering things, and sometimes seeing the whole and sometimes the part.

The deeper and longer the search became the more variable the clarity and quality of the pattern or vision seemed to be – at times, like a light burning very brightly and at other times dim, flickering and not illuminating much; at times going out altogether.

As the process of discovery is still continuing at the time of writing, the author can hardly claim to have "found" her personal praxis. Nor is the praxis one which saves her from uncertainty or fear when working with others, guarantees a planned outcome or

shuts out the creativity which comes from the interplay of imagination, feeling and intuition with logic, reason and judgement.

This thesis is the story of the search, so far, and is offered as a case-study in the application of sustained reflective techniques. As it has continued, the appropriateness of Mintzberg's picture of the potter at the wheel has become more evident to the writer. It isn't quite like finding buried treasure in a cave, or finally being able to hold the pattern up to the light and say: "So that's how it looks." It's much more like searching for something and creating something at the same time – like weaving a tapestry and working busily at the making hour after hour, seeing things in close-up, but then periodically walking away, standing back from the detailed experience, and seeing the picture emerge from the whole.

Chapter 2: Methodology: Reflection as a technique for research and the development of collective knowledge

In his post-graduate classes on social research methodology, Professor Norman Blaikie of the Faculty of Applied Social Science and Communications at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology offers a series of key questions to guide what he calls "professional practice and inquiry". The questions are intended as a basis for structuring any systematic piece of investigation or inquiry, in any discipline. They certainly provided a very useful framework for reviewing the issues of methodology relevant to this study.

The questions can be summed up as follows:

- What do I want to know?
- What counts as data?
- What do I want to do with the answers?
- How do I collect data?
- How do I make sense of it when I've collected it?

When supported by appropriate controls and rigour in the generation, collection and analysis of data, these questions become the basis for planning and implementing a research strategy.

They are also deceptively simple questions. To answer even the first two: "What do I want to know?" and "What counts as data?" requires the researcher not only to frame the subject matter of the research, but to think about the subject matter in ontological and epistemological terms – in other words, to ask: "What sort of subject matter am I dealing with?", "What sort of knowledge am I after?" Without well-thought out answers to these questions, the choice of a research paradigm is, arguably, a matter of whim and happenstance. To quote Morgan (1983, pp19-20):

> The selection of method implies some view of the situation being studied, for any decision on how to study a phenomenon carries with it certain assumptions, or explicit answers to the question, "What is being studied?". Just as we select a tennis racquet rather than a golf club to play tennis because we have a prior conception as to what the game of tennis involves, so too in relation to the process of social research, we select or favour particular kinds of methodology because we have implicit or explicit conceptions as to what we are trying to do in our research... When we frame understanding of the research process in these terms... we are encouraged to see the engagement entailing different relationships between theory and method, concept and object, and researcher and researched, rather than simply a choice about method alone.

This chapter begins with a review of the ontological and epistemological issues involved in selecting the research methodology, explains why this researcher selected the action research paradigm, and then describes the specific methodologies used within that paradigm. It continues with an analysis of the contribution of reflective techniques to research and the development of knowledge, particularly in terms of how they facilitate the creation of individual and collective learning. It includes an examination of the issues involved in using reflection as a means of researching the development of one's own praxis; and concludes with an account of the methodology employed as the basis for this thesis.

Choosing the right paradigm

a) Ontological and epistemological issues

To even acknowledge that one has a choice as to the research paradigm used is to plunge into significant ontological and epistemological debates – that is, debates about the nature of reality and how knowledge about reality is generated. A fundamental ontological question is whether "truth" or "reality" is something waiting "out there" to be found or revealed by investigative effort – realism – or whether human consciousness "creates" its own reality – nominalism (Hughes, 1980). A key epistemological question is whether knowledge is something objective, to be accumulated independently of the perceptions of any particular observer (as suggested by logical positivism, Comte, 1864) or something subjective, a product created by the observer. (The perspective of anti-positivists, including the interpretative viewpoint – see, for example, Lewin 1946 and Schutz, 1967.)

This is an enormous oversimplification of the "end" issues, since there are many variations at each "end" of these ontological and epistemological spectra. They are of practical as well as theoretical significance because different ontological and epistemological assumptions will suggest different paradigms and methodologies for the process of research. Logical positivism uses *inductive logic* in its methods of inquiry, typically involving the collection and classification of observations, the development of concepts and generalisations which would account for the observations and then the testing of those concepts. Critical rationalism, a later development of positivism, works in the opposite direction, so to speak. It employs *deductive logic* – the hypothetico-deductive-approach which begins with a theory, question or idea, draws some conclusions from the theory which can be tested, and conducts those tests by gathering data and observing outcomes. If the test fails, the theory is rejected. If it succeeds, the theory is supported but not "proven". (See Blaikie, 1991 for a more complete account.)

When the subject of research is human behaviour, the debate becomes even more interesting. The positivist view of the world is that social and psychological

phenomena can be defined and discovered in the same way as events in the natural world. "Reality consists essentially in what is available to the senses" (Hughes, 1980, p20), and is seen as having an existence external to and independent of the individual's view of it. Exploration of that reality requires objectivity and a process of scientific inquiry which is uncontaminated by the biases, values and perceptions of the observer. Only factors that can be directly observed and objectively measured form acceptable data. Structural functionalism is the research paradigm which meets the positivist's criteria for scientific inquiry and it is arguably the one which has dominated sociological and psychological inquiry in the first half of the twentieth century (Hughes, 1980).

As Jones (1985) points out, the desire to use positivist procedures in sociology has a long history. Comte (1864), who was the first to call the subject sociology, believed that the scientific method which had enabled humans to understand the laws governing nature would also reveal the laws of social behaviour. He considered that social structures are as given and pre-determined as any phenomenon in nature:

> Daffodils do not choose to be yellow, frogs do not choose to croak and have bulging eyes, water does not choose to freeze. They do nevertheless. This is just "how things are"... For (positivists) the same is true of society. We do not choose to believe the things we believe or to act in the way we act... Pre-existing cultural rules *determine* our ideas and behaviour through socialisation. Thus, in the same way as natural phenomena are the product of laws of nature, so people's ideas and actions are caused by those external social forces which make up social structures. Because of this similarity between the two kinds of subject matter – nature and society – the consensus theorist argues that the means by which they are investigated should be similar too (Jones, 1985, p83).

Comte's successor, Durkheim (1858-1917) rejected the idea that the social world can be investigated by reference to non-empirical phenomena. For him, behaviour is not caused by mysterious metaphysical, theological or psychological forces. Rather, society is a normative structure of "social factors" external to and constraining upon the individual:

This is the orthodox consensus position... the social world is a pre-existing cultural entity for its members... (and) since social facts exist independently of people's minds, they should be capable of being investigated independently of their minds too. That is, as factual, objective phenomena, they should be as capable of being observed empirically as are the equally objective and external phenomena which make up the natural world... Since behaviour and belief are

> determined by external structural forces, all we have to do is discover the number of times people do or say they think things. What we then have is empirical evidence of the forces that have produced this behaviour and belief. A social science can proceed just like a natural one. Hypotheses can be tested against empirical evidence... (Jones, 1985, p84).

The interpretivist view of the world is rather different, seeing "social reality" as fundamentally different to "reality" in the natural world on the grounds that it is socially constructed by actors in the situation. Berger and Luckman, (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality*, provide a powerful description of this process of construction.

Here, the task of the researcher is to discover the processes or mechanisms through which social actors develop and negotiate the meanings that guide their behaviour and make sense of their actions. Instead of the researcher approaching the subject with pre-determined theories about reality, "reality" is "pre-interpreted" by those one is observing (Blaikie, 1991). The researcher must immerse him or herself in the actors' world (as a participant observer), to attempt to get "inside" reality as defined by them so as to be able to identify and describe the actors' interpretations of reality and the processes by which they are constructed.

The logic process employed in this approach is the *abductive* or *dialogic* approach. It involves listening for and re-constructing the theories and constructs used by the actors, instead of imposing one's own theories or borrowing and applying the theories of others developed in other situations (Blaikie, 1980). The researcher begins by identifying the language used by the actors in ordinary day-to-day situations to describe and explain their experiences and concerns.

It might involve explaining what the actors seem to take for granted, their assumptions and beliefs. The researcher attends to the differences between his or her own way of seeing the world and theirs, and might ask: "What behaviour of theirs is challenging or

at odds with my own?" Blaikie (1980) describes these as first level (descriptive) constructs which are used by the researcher to generate second level (explanatory) constructs which have meaning and value within a technical framework or discipline area (such as sociology) to explain the "everyday life" of the actors. Schutz (1967) calls these "ideal types", and suggests that to be validated, they must meet the "postulate of adequacy" – that is, they must be recognisable or acceptable to the people or situations from which they are derived. The researcher must then check back to establish this adequacy, and in doing so, generally discovers new elements which must be incorporated into first and second level constructs. The dialogic is thus iterative in nature.

In choosing between the alternative paradigms, it is conventional to use criteria like reliability (can the findings it generates be replicated? will it generate enough "useable" data? are the data representative?); internal validity (are the conclusions warranted by the observations and data collected? is the logic involved systematic and vigorous?); face validity (is it a credible paradigm to use in the circumstances – in the eyes of the communities which judge the result of the research effort?); and generalisability (are the findings or conclusions drawn from this piece of research applicable anywhere else? do they help to understand other situations?).

Using those criteria, positivism and the structural functionalist research paradigm have had wide appeal in the scientific community, including the field of psychology, where the American behaviourist tradition (Watson, 1925) has led to a reliance on the hypothetico-deductive method as the major research paradigm in all but the European tradition of psychodynamic psychology.

However, these criteria omit the one attributed to Morgan (1983) at the start of the chapter: does the tool fit the job? In other words, does the research paradigm fit the phenomenon being investigated? and is it consistent with the researcher's

understanding of the "reality" being investigated?

This researcher was originally trained as an occupational psychologist and had seven years of undergraduate and post-graduate study in the field, together with five years of practice as a psychologist-researcher. Her reaction to the use of the structural functionalist research paradigm in the field of psychology is well summed up by Georgi's (1993) observation (cited earlier) of what he calls the ultimate contradiction: a theoretical model that in principle excludes the phenomenon of consciousness is being used to study persons with consciousness. In its original form (Watson, 1925) the behaviourist tradition firmly discounted mental phenomena as being even of relevance to the subject of human psychology – a view, ironically, that is contradicted by the very elaborate lengths to which experimental psychology goes to eliminate, or control for, the effects of the human experimenter.

For this writer, Georgi put it very well when he said:

> It is significant to note that psychology dates its beginning with the founding of a laboratory by Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, Germany in 1879. The laboratory, after all, is the most potent symbol of the natural sciences. To most contemporary practitioners of the field, psychology came of age when it brought the "study of consciousness" into the laboratory. From the perspective of this writer, it was precisely such a move that has saddled psychology with an albatross that will hinder its development until it is discarded. A psychology that deals with humans ought to be a human science.
>
> Studying consciousness adequately in the laboratory implies that consciousness presents itself to us in everyday experience like a thing. Clearly this is not the case. Consciousness does not hold still for one to study and is better characterised as a stream, a flow, or a lived flux. It is precisely its "non-thing-like" character that impresses one. But since the laboratory was built in order to investigate nature more thoroughly, and is best suited for phenomena that fit the "thing-model", how could it also be the best place to study a phenomenon like consciousness which is essentially characterised as being the opposite of a thing? Part of the meaning of a thing, it should be noted, is that it is conceived to be without consciousness ..... Of course, the issue can be forced, and that indeed is what has been happening in mainstream psychology. A researcher will set up constant conditions with the assumption that consciousness, as a dependent variable, will respond to the conditions in a systematic and predictable way, as though it were merely a product of its conditions and externally dependent on them. What is captured by such a procedure is deemed

> to be psychological data and it is not realised that more has escaped the procedures than has been captured by them. This is the basis of reductionism in psychology.
>
> What needs to be added here is the fact that none of the historical definitions of psychology, experience, behaviour, or the unconscious behave differently from consciousness in such a setting. These phenomena do not manifest themselves like things: they would all demand descriptive properties quite different from the inertness of a thing. All of the above phenomena have to be understood in terms of intentionality, i.e. a directedness to events outside themselves that make them essentially different from things. Thus, what is demanded by the subject matter of psychology is rather an expansion of the conception of science that can appropriate such phenomena faithfully as well as a philosophy that can give legitimacy to such an expansion (Georgi, 1993, pp3-4).

The writer had not read Georgi at the outset of this study (Georgi didn't make his comments until five years later) but his words capture very accurately her reason for choosing to operate within the nominalist and anti-positivist frameworks and to choose a research paradigm consistent with them.

Since making that choice, she has read with interest Altichter's (1992) observations about the emergence of what D'Avis (1984) calls a "new unity of science". The contention here is that the sciences have moved a long way since the great epistemological and ontological debates started:

> *New findings and developments in natural sciences altered the image of its subject in such a way that it is necessary to revise its methodology.* (Italics his.) Strikingly enough, these changes acknowledge features of the subject which have previously been thought to be typical for social phenomena. Thus, the opportunity for a new unity of sciences emerges ..... Once it is acknowledged that there are processes in nature which are self-organising, unpredictable, complex, systemic, specific and unique, a range of new themes is introduced into natural sciences which have been thought before to belong exclusively to social sciences (Altrichter, 1992, pp85-86).

This has prompted Altrichter to speculate about what a new unity of sciences would mean for methodology. He suggests that an alternative methodology would include the following features:

- no general guiding rules for research:

  The methodology does not include a limited set of general rules by the help of which we can distinguish scientific from unscientific research, nor a firm foundation by the appeal to which we can secure the decency of our research even from the outset. The main intention of the methodology is ... to keep the space of research and insight open since it is aware of the fact that useful procedures and methods may be developed we cannot foresee, and also of the fact that procedures

> which we know to be problematic on a general level may be of limited worth in specific settings (Altrichter, 1992, p89).

This idea seems to be consistent with Morgan's (1983) concept of "fitness for purpose" mentioned earlier.

- research into one's research:

> Research is not the application of pre-specified methods, but it is methodological in itself, is essentially a reflexive endeavour ... the methods (chosen) are to be tested as much as the hypotheses offered and the conclusions reached (Altrichter, 1992, p89).

This shifts the burden to the researcher of not only carefully selecting methodologies and techniques but of evaluating their effectiveness. An attempt to do this in relation to the work contained in this thesis is made in Chapter 6. There were, however, some important choices that the researcher had to make at the outset – and during the progress of the research that need to be reviewed. These issues are explored in detail in this chapter.

b) Others issues in the choice of methodology

So far, however, the discussion has been entirely dominated by knowledge issues – by ontological and epistemological considerations. Morgan (1983) suggests that there are others which are important in the choice of methodology – such as ethical, ideological and political ones:

> If there are evaluative criteria that can be brought to bear on the nature of knowledge, they relate as much to the way knowledge serves to guide and shape ourselves as human beings – to the consequences of knowledge, in the sense of what knowledge does to and for humans – as to the idea that there are fixed points of reference against which knowledge can be judged "right", "wrong" or unambiguously "better than" (Morgan, 1983, p373).

The writer at first addressed these criteria in a pragmatic way, by asking the second of

Blaikie's questions listed at the beginning of the chapter: what do I want to do with the answers? Possible answers are: to *describe* something, to *explain* it, to *change* it or *make generalisations* about it or in some other way to *apply* or *exploit* the findings.

At the outset, this writer's needs included all of these things. She wanted to be able to *describe* more clearly the circumstances which suggest that an adult manager is ready to learn something or in some way extend his/her skill repertoire. She wanted to be able to capture the language which managers – and those who help them learn – use to *describe* their experiences of learning and their strategies for facilitating it. She wanted, in the end, to be able to more accurately describe her own experiences, ideas and strategies.

She also wanted to be able to *explain* things – in particular, to understand more about how and why learning and change processes work in adults. Finally, she was very interested in *application* – if she could describe and explain these phenomena, she should be better placed to recognise readiness for learning and change, and to facilitate more effectively the processes which enhance it.

The answers given to Blaikie's questions start to provide answers to those posed by Morgan, because they invite a transition from the role of researcher to the role of practitioner. This writer wanted to be able to conduct research in a way that would allow her to develop her craft or praxis, and to do it in a way that would be helpful to others as well as illuminating to herself. She wanted to work with people, not "on" them: in fact, she relied upon their conscious contribution to their own development as well as valuing and needing their conscious contribution to her own.
The research paradigm which seemed to meet these criteria – as well as being acceptable to her in ontological and epistemological terms – was that of action research.

The action research paradigm

As Dick (1992) has noted, and as the name suggests, action research is a methodology which has two aims: an action aim (to bring about change in some community or organisation or program or intervention) and a research aim (to increase knowledge and understanding on the part of the researcher or the client or both, or some other wider community). He notes, however, that the relative importance of the two aims can vary, with one or the other sometimes predominating.

Rapoport's (1970, p499) definition of action research is one of the most widely quoted on the subject:

> Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.

Others (for example, Susman & Evered, 1978) have added a third aim – namely, to develop the competency of people facing problems to help themselves and become self-sufficient in the future.

In action research, the practitioner is both researcher and agent actor (as a manager, consultant or other form of "change-agent").

Prideaux (1990) has identified five potential outcomes of action research:

- a change in the situation, practice or behaviour of the client;

- improved understanding of the client's situation or behaviour for the client and the researcher/change agent;

- development in the competence and practice of the researcher/change agent;

- additions to the store of knowledge and theory available to the wider professional and general community;

- improved understanding of the processes of organisational change.

Action research was first advocated in the English-speaking world by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1946 as a way of combining action – especially the achievement of social and organisational change – with the generation of knowledge and theory. McTaggart (1992) comments that though the invention of the term action research is often attributed to Lewin:

> ... recent historical work by Peter Gstettner and Herbert Altrichter then at the University of Klagenfurt shows that "action research" did not have its origins in the disciplines of social psychology but in community activism. The familiar plan, act, observe, reflect spiral attributed to Kurt Lewin (1946) was not the beginning of action research, even though his biographer claimed that Lewin was the inventor of the term (Marrow, 1969). Gstettner and Altrichter have discovered that J.L. Moreno, physician, social philosopher, poet and the inventor of the concepts of "sociometry", "psychodrama", "sociodrama" and "role play" had a much more "actionist" view of action research. Moreno was also the first to use the terms "inter-action research" and "action research" (McTaggart, 1992, p2).

Lewin's interest was founded in his very immediate concerns about Fascism, anti-semitism and inter-group conflict during the early 1940's. He was concerned that traditional positivistic research methods were not helping in the resolution of critical social problems. The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations based in Britain – an interdisciplinary group which drew on psychoanalysis and social psychiatry – was also committed to "the social engagement of social sciences" (Susman & Evered, 1978). The process of action research can be described as a cycle of planning, action and review of the action resulting in other continuing and iterative cycles of planning, action and review. (See Figure 1.)

Susman and Evered (1978), have offered a very systematic assessment of the scientific merits of action research. Judged against the criteria of positivist science, it is not capable of offering scientific explanation. Judged more broadly, it does have the capacity to generate knowledge for use in solving problems faced by individuals and organisations. To the question, which is better – positivist science or action research – their answer is: it all depends on what you want to study and under what conditions.

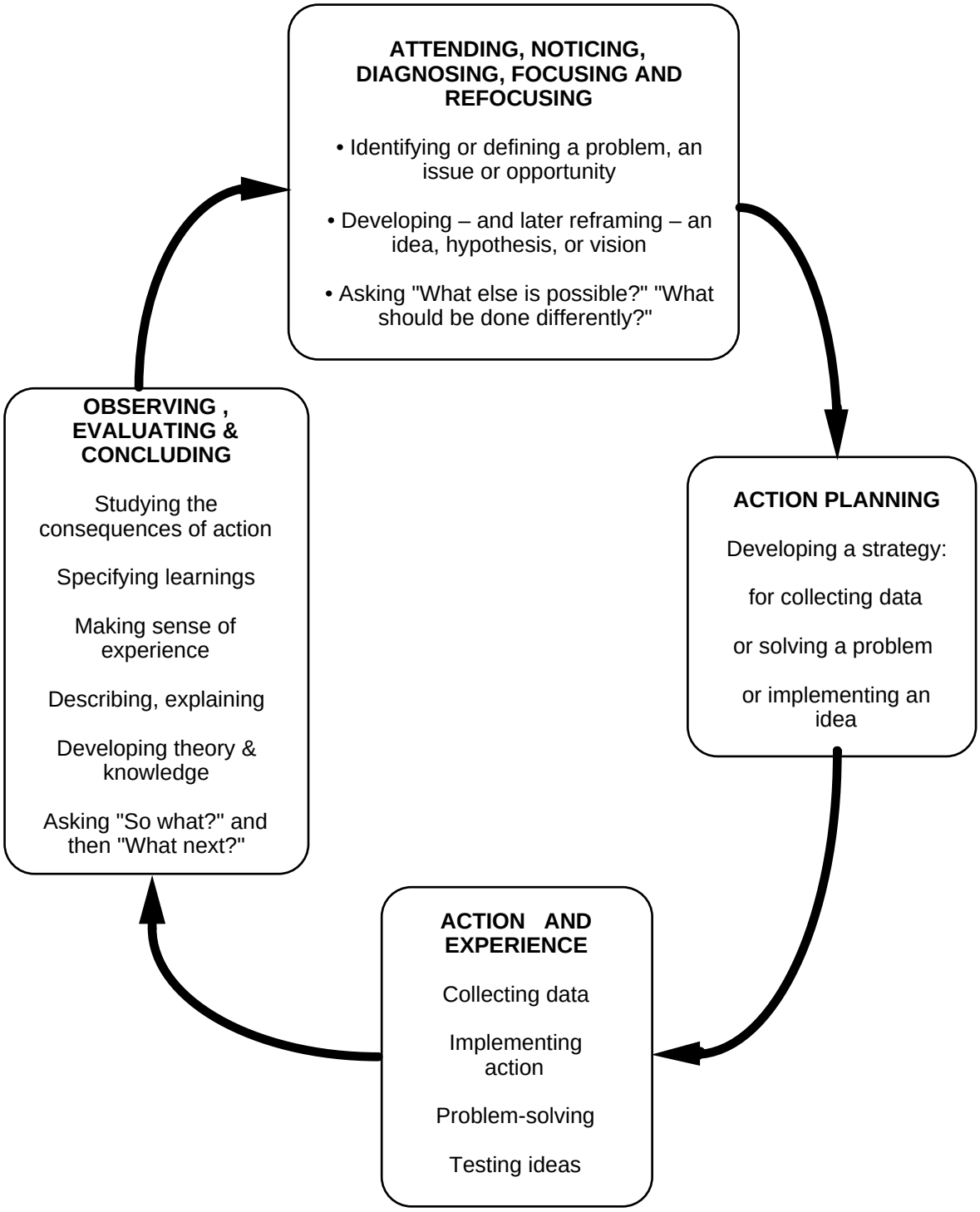


Figure 1: The action research cycle

They suggest that there are many potential reasons for using the action research paradigm. Against the background of ontological and epistemological issues raised in the previous section, it can be useful when:

- the "subject" is "self-reflective" ("conscious");
- the reason for undertaking the action research intervention is to solve a problem which the subject has not helped to define and which cannot be solved without their active involvement;
- the research question or purpose cannot be teased out without the co-operation of the "subject";
- broad or fuzzy research questions are to be developed and tackled in a very particular context;
- a wide range of factors are at play in the context of a dynamic relationship between actors in a complex "real-life" situation;
- the issue or situation concerned must be explored over a long period of time with the subject;
- current experience is the most effective way of creating possibilities and opportunities for change;
- the practitioner needs a methodology that combines rigour with responsiveness;
- the practitioner needs to continuously tap into and extend his or her own experience and knowledge in order to help effect change in the issue or problem being addressed.

Given the set of questions with which she became pre-occupied (see Chapter 1, p11) this writer was attracted to the action research paradigm for all of those reasons. And she was interested in all the outcomes identified by Prideaux (1990) and mentioned earlier. It is true that she was not engaged in effecting change in any one organisational or community setting, as is most often the case with action research. But she was certainly engaged in the business of creating change in co-operation with others.

Rapoport's definition of action research (cited earlier) emphasises that the action is carried out in collaboration between the action researcher and the client system. In practice, that collaboration might be focussed on all or only some phases of the action research cycle. For example, the client might be the one who undertakes all or most of the action, while the researcher participates in the diagnosis, planning, reflection and evaluation – or vice versa. There might be more or less involvement by one or other parties in any phase of the process, and this pattern of involvement might change as further cycles of the process take their course. But whatever the level and focus of involvement, action research has been developed around the premise that people are to be engaged with, not acted upon, that they are capable of managing themselves in their organisational roles rather than being made the objects of research.

Action research as a vehicle for learning

Action research was initially attractive to this researcher on pragmatic rather that ontological or epistemological grounds, because:

> action research has as its central feature the use of changes in practice as a way of inducing improvement in the practice itself, the situation in which it occurs, the rationale for the work, and in the understanding of all of these. Action research uses strategic action as a probe for improvement and understanding (Braun et al, 1988).

While there are many ways in which learning can take place during the course of action research (in fact, it can happen in all of the ways in which human beings learn) it lends itself very obviously to the application of *action learning* approaches, deriving from the work of Reg Revans (see, for example, Revans, 1980 and 1982).

Lessem (1982) has prepared a delightful "biography of action learning" in which he traces the development of Revan's work and thinking. He notes that the action learning concept was applied with "discipline and design" for the first time in British industry in the 1970's (Lessem, 1982, p12). Action learning is an approach to development which is based on learning from experience. In its "purest" form, an individual is invited to spend a number of months working on a new project or task, perhaps in a situation unfamiliar to that person. During that time, the individual becomes part of a learning-set or group of four or five other learners, employing a social process through which, to quote Lessem "by the apparent incongruity of their exchanges ... (the learners) ... frequently cause each other to examine afresh both "project" design and its implementation" (Lessem, 1982, p12).

Later developments of the concept do not necessarily presume the continued existence of a learning group, but still invite the learner to engage in systematic reflection on their experience, in a variety of ways (see, for example, the work of Marsick et al, on "action-reflection learning", 1992). Another – related – approach is the problem-oriented process suggested by Bowden (1986) which builds the context of a management development program on the real issues and problems facing the organisation and the managers in it. In the work of the educator Schon (1987), the use of systematic reflection as an effective way for practitioners to learn is brought to life in the context of dialogue between "learner" and "educator". The metaphor of "the master class" perhaps sums up best the context in which he explains reflection.

The key to experience-based learning is that the individual is asked to access direct

personal experience and practice in "real life" situations, as compared with reading about other people's experience and ideas, or simply thinking about ideas in a training situation. The role of the management educator is to facilitate ways in which people can create, access and reflect upon their experience. Kolb's (1984) learning cycle describes the processes involved for the learner – of collecting data through experience, trying to make sense of the data, perhaps developing an idea or conclusion which can be tested through further experience and the engaging in iterative cycles of reflecting, concluding and experiencing. It is the same concept which is captured in the action research cycle depicted earlier in Figure 1.

While there are many techniques which assist the process of action learning, it is perhaps helpful to mention two which are illustrative of what is available. One is the contract learning process (Knowles, 1984) which provides a framework for thinking about and documenting experiences which provide learning opportunities. The phases in a learning contract, as described by Prideaux and Ford (1988), include: diagnosing a learning need; specifying learning objectives; developing a learning plan; implementing the learning activities set out in the plan; and finally, evaluating the learning achieved and the benefits of the learning to that individual, to organisational stakeholders and to others with an interest in the achievements and learning of the individual.

Critical incident analysis is another technique designed to help individuals learn from and through experience. Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1986) are among those who have documented this tool, which requires the individual to document and reflect upon a specific incident or encounter which has occurred during the course of everyday experience, whether at work or elsewhere. The incident will usually be one which has created some discomfort, challenge, difficulty or surprise – something that has not worked out as expected, or the individual has been surprised, dismayed or unexpectedly pleased by the way something has been managed. The invitation is to

reflect systematically on the experience from a number of new points, by asking such questions as: "What exactly happened?", "What did I do?", "What did I say?", "What did others do or say?", "How did I feel about what was happening?", "Do I have any idea of how they felt?", "What was the impact of what I – and they – did?", "Did I do what I really wanted or needed to do?", "If not, do I know why not?", "What would I do differently *next* time?"

This technique is really the application of the action learning cycle to a particular event – like "replaying the tape" and watching it in slow motion, relying of course on one's memory of the events, but also, if appropriate, accessing the experience of others involved – as a means of testing the reality of one's own interpretations and recollections.

The close alignment in her work of action research and action learning was a continual source of creative tension for this writer, throughout the course of the study. As acknowledged earlier, she was in the position of using action research and action learning methods in the context of management development. This led, among other things, to the creation of a situation in which the development of her own praxis became the subject of the study, hand-in-hand with the development of a "theory". Some of the methodological implications of that situation are explored later in this chapter.

Before closing off this section, however, it is important to articulate a very fundamental concern that has been raised by – among others – McTaggart (1992). He believes that the original value of action research – as espoused by Lewin (1946) for example – are in danger of being corrupted when organisations use the term action research:

> as the rubric for activities such as action learning, for example in the work of "quality circles", themselves little more than a post-modern expression of

> Taylorism in the guise of the propagation of "world best practice" (Watkins, 1992). In these situations, workers, managers and investors are alike coopted into the value-system of the organisation and its fundamental purposes as a societal institution are not called into question. The ordinary expectation among action researchers is the antithesis of that: a fundamental purpose of action research is to make practices and the values they embody explicit and problematic...
>
> When we see modern technicist versions of action research and action learning which are oriented, for example, towards "quality control" or "staff development" with both being very narrowly understood, we understand how an emphasis on "learning" denies the fundamental liberatory aspirations of Moreno's work with prostitutes in Spittelburg, Vienna, at the turn of the century, Kurt Lewin's work with those disadvantaged by race and poverty in post-war United States, and Reg Revan's (1980, 1982) work in the mines of Sheffield in post-war England where the term "action learning" first gained currency. "Workplace *learning*" too often means applying routines invented by others, believing reasons invented by others, servicing aspirations invented by others, and giving expression to values advocated by others. In contrast, work place *knowledge production* means *participation* in the praxis of intervention and construction of new ways of working, in the justification of new ways of working and new working goals, and in the formulation of more complex and sophisticated ways of valuing work, work culture and its place in people's lifeworlds (McTaggart, 1992, pp4 and 6).

Kemmis (1992) and Zuber-Skerritt (1992) raise the same issue. Berger and Luckman (1966) describe the "social" construction of reality but these writers remind us just how completely that construction of reality is determined by the particular society in which one lives, noting that body of Russian and German thinking and literature which suggests that even the inner plane of consciousness is generated by society. For them, one of the values of action research is that it has the potential to liberate or emancipate individuals from socially conditioned mind-sets, values and possibly even states of consciousness. This is consistent with what Freire (1970, p27) describes as "conscientisation": "The process by which people, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-historical reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality."

Kemmis (1992, p60) suggests as an alternative to both positivist and interpretive research methodologies, a third "critical method" which is neither objective nor subjective but is both objective and subjective, "in the sense that one treats oneself and

one's fellows (and the social structures of which one is a part) both as subjects and objects in a process of *critical reflection and self-reflection*" (italics his).

The present writer believes that Kemmis' interpretation of the interpretivist position is too narrow, and that it does, in fact, admit the concept of self-reflection. It will be argued later in this thesis that Ducker's (1969) "age of discontinuity" implies a capacity for learning which is critically reflective and self-reflective in precisely the way that these writers advocate.

This line of thinking is developed in Chapter 3, although later in the current chapter there is preliminary exploration of the kind of reflection that is required to surface fundamental values and mindsets.

Action research and the generation of useful knowledge

As a research paradigm action research also had appeal to this researcher because it allowed investigation to commence exactly like a fishing trip – with a hunch that the waters were worth fishing; not much hope, at least initially, of establishing a high order of explanation, but an eagerness to hear what people had to say, to explore her own implicit ideas as well as theirs, and to work with them in the creation of greater insight – description, if not explanation – into what helps and what doesn't help on the voyage of learning to be a better manager.

It has been mentioned earlier that as the study continued, the researcher did find herself grappling with something that seemed like "theory-building", albeit a personal theory intended to enrich her practice. She wanted to know why the reflective process she was interested in worked, and she needed to combine her own thinking and experience with the thinking and experience of others in order to do so.

So it is important to comment on the capacity of action research to generate useful knowledge within the interpretivist framework. There are at least two important issues to be considered here: one is the capacity of the paradigm to generate an understanding or knowledge of a situation which is helpful in enabling the researcher and other players to take effective action; the other is the capacity of the paradigm to generate understanding or knowledge which is useful to others, in different situations. By "understanding or knowledge" what is meant here is both the capacity to describe what is happening and the capacity to explain it (by constructing a theory about why it is happening). Both involve the construction of meaning or "sense-making".

It needs to be acknowledged that the findings or conclusions drawn from action research are not necessarily easy to generate and apply to other situations – that it produces "local knowledge". When one examines the history of psychological research, one could equally argue that in its efforts to maintain scientific rigour from the positivist perspective, it has produced research results that are so narrowly focussed and fragmented as to be of little practical value (Westland, 1978).

Nonetheless, the issue is an important one. For the researcher, the issue is: "Will I be able to make this technique work again with a different person? in a different situation?" For the other players in the situation, the issue is: "Will we able to do this again, by ourselves?" For "outsiders", the issue is: "Will it work for us? in a different organisation, industry, culture, etc?"

For the practitioner engaged in action research, the importance of understanding and impacting on a particular or local situation can be so great that the consideration of producing more broadly applicable knowledge is almost a luxury. For the researcher, however, the need to do both creates a potential tension between the need for me or us to understand it and "get it right this time" and the need to prove that how I/we got it right is replicable by others.

There are at least two ways in which researchers are encouraged to handle this tension (see, for example, Dick, 1992): one is by the use of cyclical or iterative processes which encourage the researcher to continually test his/her ideas in action, and the second is the use of what Dick (1992) calls the dialectic – working with multiple information sources that are preferably independent of one another and ensuring that other people engage with and check the researcher's thinking and action.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) place a strong emphasis on the former in their book *Participating in Action Research Methodology*. This is a methodology which Kemmis and McTaggart have applied extensively in their teaching at Deakin University, in Victoria.

The essence of their approach is to use a defined cycle of research consisting of four steps: plan, act, observe and reflect. The cycle is carried out by the participants or clients of the intervention, it is not something done to the clients by the researcher. It is called an "emancipating" approach because it is said to "liberate" those who are researched from the prevailing value-sets of the contexts in which they work. The researcher works "arm-in-arm" with the client (Prideaux, 1990), in a collaborative relationship.

The "dialectic" is really a variation on what is known as "triangulation" (Jick, 1979). The idea is to use similarities and differences in the data from different sources to increase the rigour of the progress; for example, by using:

- different informants or participants or different samples of informants or participants;
- different research settings;

- the same informant or participant responding to different questions which address the same topic from different perspectives;
- information collected at different times;
- different researchers;
- or, as in triangulation, different methods.

In these ways, it is hoped, both the internal validity of the process (the rigour of the conclusions reached) and its generalisability can be maximised. Dialectical methodologies are not just about replication, but about rigorously and deliberately checking the logic processes used and the application of convergent techniques which reduce the reliance of the process on any one individual.

It is perhaps useful at this point to comment on the logic and processes which are involved in action research. It has the potential to combine the inductive, deductive and abductive logic processes described earlier, although – as already acknowledged – it is not capable of meeting the criteria of positivist science.

The deductive approach is a "top-down" one which assumes that we have a theory, an idea, a vision, a proposition or hypothesis which we test against what is actually observed. Apart from being the logical thing to do when we have an idea that we want to try out, this approach has the advantage of giving us some focus for the investigation and usually putting some limits around what's relevant and what isn't. As an approach, it allows us to test both descriptions and explanations against some form of experience.

The inductive – or "bottom-up" – approach invites us to start out with a set of observations and then find constructs or theories which will describe or explain the

phenomena so observed. It is the equivalent of going on a fishing trip when all we have is a "tip-off" that some waters may be more fertile than others. It has the advantage that it may limit the temptation to make premature and unwarranted assumptions about what is being dealt with. It encourages us to go looking for the right questions, instead of the right answers, and increases the likelihood that we will be "surprised" by what we experience, since we deliberately try to limit the extent to which we impose limits on our potential experience.

It has the decided disadvantage of being "messy", unfocussed, potentially time-consuming and expensive, relative to a "top-down" approach. Potentially, everything is relevant data and "grist to the mill".

In real life, it can be argued that social research is generally a combination of these two approaches – leaving aside the rigidly hypothetico-deductive methodology beloved of experimental psychology.

As a paradigm that falls within the interpretivist framework, it is hardly surprising that the abductive logic or dialogic approach can also be easily incorporated in action research. The iterative nature of that logic process is particularly apt.

Because action research is an iterative, cyclical process, it provides focus but has the potential to keep presenting us with richer and more extensive data, with all the attendant possibilities of surprise. The researcher can literally go on engaging with the data – in the form of conversations, dialogue, listening, observing, reading – for as long as needed, until there are no more useful possibilities or meanings to be created. Experience is continually recycled; earlier experiences and data are re-visited with the wisdom of accumulated learning; further and new experience is planned in the light of what went on before, but whatever happens on the journey, both planned and unplanned, will be systematically reviewed and evaluated.

Checkland's (1981) *Soft Systems Methodology* is an example of abduction – using dialectics to generate the "ideal types" mentioned earlier in this chapter (Schutz, 1967).

Baburoglu and Raun (1992) take the logic process one step further, by adding what they call the "constructivist epistemological argument" – the contention that action research can be based on, and devoted to the construction of, images of desirable futures, so-called "future theories" and not focussed on the solution of current or pre-existing problems and issues. "Future theories" identify ends and means for both individual and organisational development. They see these as being generated jointly by the stakeholders of a system and the involved action researcher, and tested every time that the prescriptions for action contained in them are followed by stakeholders within a system.

The management of individuality and subjectivity in action research

Whatever logic process is used, action researchers are often encouraged to employ techniques which encourage convergent thinking among participants (whether researcher, client or participant), as a way of injecting internal validity into the process. By itself this does not guarantee that the result or findings produced by that process are necessarily applicable anywhere else, but it helps to ensure that they were at least valid in the context in which – and for which – they were originally generated.

To help someone outside the research situation form any conclusion about how helpful precisely the research findings might be to them, it is very important to indicate what this context was – to be clear not only about exactly how the research was conducted, but also where it was conducted and by whom. This puts the work in context, in time and place and culture. This writer, as an academic supervisor, insists on quite explicit detail from action research students, in this respect, and has come to regard the

capacity to accurately identify and describe the context of research as a research skill in its own right. Noticing what is important to mention to others about the context requires discernment about what is different or particularly characteristic of any given situation. It is a way of managing the potentially highly individualistic nature of research findings by acknowledging it, rather than hiding it.

Zuber-Skerritt (1991) has edited and contributed to a collection of papers which includes contributions by a number of Australian researchers and academics. This book effectively integrates and critiques recent thinking and practice in the application of action research in higher education settings, although the issues and conclusions drawn out are relevant in many other settings. It contains some very sophisticated thinking about the epistemological and ontological significance of action research (see, for example, Altrichter's (1992, pp82-84) treatment of the question of validation).

Leaving that book aside, however, in reviewing the action research literature, this writer became increasingly concerned about the way in which subjectivity and the individual's own search for meaning and understanding are sometimes treated. Dick (1972), by way of illustrating dialectic processes in action, describes convergent interviewing which uses paired interviews to create a dialectic. "So for example, if two interviewees disagree about x, whatever x is, look for exceptions in later interviews. If the interviewees disagree about x, try in later interviews to explain the disagreement. If only one person mentions x, ignore it" (Dick, 1992, p14). This was a comment which surprised this writer, since it suggested that the reaction of one individual is to be ignored, if it doesn't fit with the views of others.

Although Dick's comment reflects the thinking of a particular individual, the comment – and others like it – are potentially influential ones because they appear in a document specifically prepared to give Australian post-graduate students advice about conducting action research. Similarly, it is interesting to read a document prepared by

the Fielding Institute in California – an educational organisation which espouses the value of non-positivist research paradigms and in many ways acknowledges the highly personal character of action research (see its Study Guide, Fielding Institute, 1991). Their Study Guide for post-graduate students gives what the writer regards as a very clear account of the interpretivist phenomenological perspective (Husserl, 1954) and some examples of paradigms which would be acceptable within that perspective, and says that phenomenological methods are appropriate when there is no established understanding of a phenomenon, nothing sufficiently closely related from which to make valid inferences, or distrust of the prevailing description or explanation of some behaviour of interest. It cites, for example, a PhD dissertation which investigates the experiences of a woman preparing to take over the business of her father. The same document, in the same paragraph, asserts that phenomenological methods are not appropriate when one is trying to "predict and control" (Husserl, 1954, p40). The message, clearly given in this and other parts of the document, is that individual knowledge and understanding count for little when there is "real" scientific work to be done. Judged in this way, the understanding generated by Einstein's "kinaesthetic thinking" process (Koestler, 1964, p171) – namely that $E=mc^2$ – would have to be dismissed as being of little value in controlling or predicting natural phenomena.

Whilst acknowledging the need to balance individual knowledge and understanding with the generation of collective wisdom, this writer would agree with Georgi (1993) that almost without knowing it, people coming from an anti-positivist interpretivist perspective can put themselves back into a positivist view of the world, in which personal, particular and local understanding and wisdom is potentially both under-valued and even actively discouraged in the research context.

It might be that, at heart, we are all realists. By contrast, the *solipsistic* perspective – an extreme nominativist view of the world which has each of us trapped in individual realities of our own making with no way of ever knowing whether it is shared by

anyone else (see Hughes, 1980) is a very challenging one for human beings, let alone researchers, to accept. We reach out, in many different ways, for reassurance that there are other human beings out there, that there are things which have solid shape and real existence, that exist independently of us. We also, at times, reach out for "truth" and knowledge in various forms, for the comfort that comes from shared understanding. The existential anxiety associated with any other conception of the universe is perhaps too awful for us to contemplate. Arguably even the interpretivist, seeking explanation within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity, within the frame of reference of the participant as opposed to the observer of action, may have trouble with that proposition, and underneath it all, take shelter in a realist view of the world.

Reanney (1993) makes the point well:

> I want to stress how axiomatic this assumption is and how deeply it colours our thinking; the idea that a human mind can experiment with Nature in a such a way that the experimenter does not influence the outcome of the experiment lies at the core of the scientific method; it is the basis for the doctrine of "objectivity". This doctrine has paramount status in our culture, not just in physics but in the so-called "social sciences" that look to "hard" science for their validation.
>
> This assumption is pervasive, powerful, accepted, compelling – and *wrong*.
>
> The insight that has restructured our vision comes from a branch of physics called *quantum mechanics*. Stripped of its complexities, the insight is simply this, that the act of observation changes the nature of the thing observed, that the observer and the observed, far from being separate, are coupled in the most intimate of ways.
>
> Physicist John Wheeler summed up this radical refocussing in these words:
>
> Nothing is more important about the quantum principle than this, that it destroys the concept of the world as "sitting out there", with the observer safely separated from it by a 20cm slab of plate glass. Even to observe so minuscule an object as an electron he must shatter the glass. He must reach in... Moreover the measurement changes the state of the electron. The universe will never afterwards be the same. To describe what has happened one has to cross out that old word "observer" and put in its place the new word "participator".
>
> Precisely because it comes from the direction they least expect it, namely

> science itself, the quantum message is very threatening to people who still live within the subject/object duality, so let me try and explain it in my own language.
>
> By its own terms of reference, science attempted to set itself apart from the mental processes that made its successes possible. But this separation was never achievable, even in principle. Facts, items of awareness, only gain meaning if they are brought together into statements or theories. Yet the very act of integration that produces a theory draws on an invisible software of shared presuppositions and unconsciously accepted value judgements and this subliminal software creates the mindset we inhabit. This mindset, this neural programming, was written by natural selection and by our own past experience. It is thus not, in any sense, "absolute", it can and must and does reflect "where we come from".
>
> This is the often-said but seldom understood message of quantum physics – simple and shattering – that the data has no meaning apart from the software that organises it, that there is no such thing as an "uninterpreted fact".

The quantum revolution impacts on our whole concept of reality. because of the way we are made, biologically, we see things as external to us – "before our eyes", in our field of vision, "out there" – on a sheet of paper or at the end of a microscope. Yet the real act of seeing that allows us to make sense of the world goes on *behind* our eyes. It is the mental program that integrates the data we receive, not the receiving organ (eye) which permits us to see. We see with our software. Which means that *our reality can only be as good as the software we bring to it* (Reanney, 1993, pp2-3).

Among interpretivists, despite the acknowledgment of social reality as being a "constructed" reality which is different from the natural world, there may perhaps still be the underlying belief that "out there somewhere" there is such a thing as a "pure" data – even accepting that pure psycho-social data is made up of the subjective thoughts, feelings and actions of other human beings. This thinking is nicely illustrated in the work of the writer's graduate student, quoted earlier (Percy, 1993):

> Raw data is data in its "purest" form, uncontaminated by the individual researcher's psychological filtering process. The filtering process has two sieves: both are connected to our mental models, or how we make sense of the world... One sieve selectively sifts through the available data, so that data which has some significance for us, stands out – what we choose to pay attention to and, conversely what data we block, ignore or miss by selecting it out of

> awareness. The other sieve acts as a translator, interpreting data into our internal language system so that it has meaning. This latter sieve may effectively and unintentionally embellish and change the raw data (Percy, 1993, p66).

This quotation was interesting for this writer because the student in question would describe herself as an interpretivist (Percy, 1993) and yet does not seem to acknowledge that in an interpretivist world view, there is no such thing as "uncontaminated" psycho-social data.

This is not intended to be an argument for removing all efforts at rigour in interpretivist research, but it is contended by this writer that efforts to eliminate or ignore the efforts of individuals to construct meaning – or subjectivity, as it is more often called – in interpretivist research are misdirected. It is, in her view, one thing to challenge, refine and enrich the researcher's thinking through cyclical activity, triangulation and dialogue with others; it is quite another to imply that individual thinking either has no place in the process or in some way contaminates it. Her contention is that by acknowledging individuality, by respecting it and seeking to understand it, and by placing it carefully in context, we not only help individuals to create meaning for themselves, but to add in important ways to our collective knowledge and understanding.

The *hermeneutic* stream of interpretivist thinking (Reason & Hawkins, 1988) does seem prepared to confront the methodological implications of a socially constructed universe, if not an individually constructed one. Defined as "the science of interpretation", it suggests that no amount of analytic-empirical data can totally establish meaning, since meaning is not established by sensory data but by unrestrained communicative inquiry and interpretation.

By comparison with the positivistic perspective, in the hermeneutic approach the

researcher's attention is not focussed solely around theories and observed problems, but is allowed to float more widely; "tacit" knowledge (the kind of understanding that cannot be articulated in words or is not entirely conscious) is given an important role; researchers accept influence from both science and personal experience, and can use their personality and values as instruments; researchers allow both feelings and reason to govern their actions; and researchers partially – and sometimes wholly – create what they study, for example, the meaning of a process or document (Reason, 1988).

Reason and Hawkins (1988), as major advocates of the hermeneutic perspective, are keen to point out that they are not suggesting a return to the confusion and potential error of naive inquiry. Nor do they seek the "yoga of objectivity": the development (over 10-15 years) of a state of mind which is totally detached, objective, analytical, clinical and pure, which in their view creates "essentially dead knowledge, alienated from its source" (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p12).

They are in pursuit of what they describe as an emerging new paradigm, which goes beyond the split between objective and subjective data, and achieves what they refer to as "critical subjectivity", a state in which we see the world as *our* world, rather than *the* world (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p12).

Although hermeneutic tools of inquiry are still regarded with suspicion even by many who think of themselves as interpretivists (Dick, 1992, for example, described them as "counter cultural"), they do challenge us to think about the role and experience of the researcher in the process, instead of focussing simply on the paradigm, methodologies and techniques he or she uses. There are several aspects to this role and experience that will be pursued here: the potential of the research process to *change the researcher*; the extent to which the researcher is *part of the product* – as well as the process – of research; and the extent to which the researcher becomes *the subject of the research*.

The potential of the research process to change the researcher

The capacity of action research to change the researcher has already been acknowledged in this chapter. Changes in the researcher's praxis and other kinds of learning are expected and encouraged. Nor is it simply a shift in the knowledge of the researcher that might be involved. The researcher might be required to adjust the very concepts, mental models and implicit theories which he/she used to generate the data in the first place.

As Morgan (1983, p373) has noted: "When we engage in action research, thought and interpretation, we are not simply involved in instrumental processes of acquiring knowledge, but in processes through which we actually make and re-make ourselves as human beings." The action researcher is not like a catalyst which remains unaltered by the chemical reaction which it influences.

Revans apparently did not believe that acknowledgment of the researcher as learner compromised the scientific value of the process. In fact, he has gone so far as to identify action learning with the scientific method:

> Action learning is also a personal activity which combines objective analysis ("science") and subjective commitment ("religion"). Its logical foundation is the structural identity of the scientific method, of rational decision making, of the exchange of sound advice and fair criticism, and of the learning of new behaviour. Yet, while talking and argument call only for intelligence or quickness of wit, doing and action call for commitment or true belief. For, in taking action, Revans claims, especially after one has clearly exposed one's motives to close and critical colleagues, one is obliged to explore that inner self otherwise so often taken for granted. In seeking answers to difficult work-related questions, especially in conditions of risk and confusion, miners, nurses and managers begin to learn who they themselves may be: to answer their "work-questions" they must, at the same time, explore their "self-questions". The fundamental law of industrial behaviour, that Revans was seeking in the 1950s, may well have been discovered by him in the 1970s:
>
> knowledge is the consequence of action, and to know is the same as to do

(Revans, 1982)

or, to elaborate (Revans, 1981):

> the underlying structures of successful achievement, of learning, of intelligent counselling, and of what we call the scientific method, are logically identical (Lessem, 1982, pp12-13).

Having identified action learning with the scientific method, Revans (1982, p723) sets out a process of learning and scientific inquiry called the "System Beta" which is a combination of the inductive and deductive logic processes described earlier. The point is that he accepted the essentially human character of the process, and the involvement of the researcher or learner.

Here is Lessem (1982) again, making a similar point:

> Action learning, at its simplest, is an approach to management education. At its most profound it is a form of personal therapy, a means of social and economic transformation, and even a way of life. Let me try to reconstruct Revan's argument, step by step.
>
> We start with the symbolic amalgamation of "artisan" and "scribe". Knowledge, for Revans, can be only the outcome of action. By wrestling (as artisan) with live problems, and subsequently reflecting (as scribe) upon the results of his achievements, the learner acquires knowledge. Revans continues with the symbolic intermingling of "education" and "industry". For the knowledge acquired is not so much the facts or techniques imparted by an educator, but, more appropriately, the reinterpretation of the practitioner's own existing knowledge (Lessem, 1982, p12).

Because reflection leads back into action of one kind of another, and action is followed by reflection of one kind or another, the possibility that applied learning (defined by this writer as *a sustained change in behaviour*) will take place is greatly increased.

This can happen for several reasons. For example, systematically thinking about the experience can trigger new or deeper understanding of what is or was happening and, equipped with this insight, we can slightly modify our behaviour next time, or actively experiment with something quite different. Or the act of diagnosing and focussing can

bring an issue into different perspective and lead to a re-framing of what we think we are trying to do and actually need to do. When this reframing leads to a significant shift in the way we view the world and in the way we act in the world, Argyris (1982) would say that we are engaged in double-loop learning.

This is the kind of learning in which we "shift gears" in the way we behave. To use the writer's own metaphor, we shift from first, through second, to third position. In the first position, we simply do what comes naturally, through habit, instinct or skills. We don't stop and think about it, we just do it. In second position, we do stop and think about it – usually because someone or something has challenged our first position behaviour in some way. Perhaps we didn't get the response we expected, or perhaps we were facing something new or unfamiliar or difficult that caused us to stop and review our action. In third position, we stop and not only think, but think about the way we are thinking – we start questioning why we are doing what we are doing. For example, we might check the assumptions we've been making or the way we've been feeling or the motives behind our actions. When we act from third position we are engaging in double-loop learning. Senge (199) would say that we are reviewing our "mental models", Argyris and Schon (1978) that we are accessing our "implicit theories". Both these phrases imply a reliance on thinking but this writer's use of the term third position extends to emotional and intuitive processes and experience.

Not all the learning that happens during the process will be double-loop learning from third position. Much of it will be the result of day-to-day incremental change which we barely notice or acknowledge. We go on operating from our first or second position; nonetheless, over time, differences in what we do might still happen because, without noticing, people or events in the world outside are shaping our responses. This is the process that psychologists call "conditioning" (Thorndike, 1932).

Whether it is happening at the levels of first, second or third position, the processes

involve a continuous – and often complex and subtle – interplay between internal data (the inner world of experience, including ideas, thoughts, feelings, fantasies, dreams and imaginings) and the external data, delivered to us through our senses, which gives us information about what is happening in the world beyond ourselves. There is a constant inter-mingling of the two sets of data, each partly creating, certainly modifying and often filtering the other.

The present writer identifies this process with the "first-person" or "critical" research method described by Kemmis (1992) and referred to earlier in this chapter.

The researcher as part of the product – as well as of the process – of research

Heidegger (1962) and others view research as a specific form of *human* action because human minds are the research instruments through which all data is initially generated and ultimately interpreted. From that perspective the concepts, filters, blind spots, assumptions, values, stereotypes, projections and implicit theories which are in the mind of the investigator must inevitably be part of the product in any attempts at description and explanation. Again, the work of Berger and Luckman (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality* is a powerful statement of how inescapably the description – let alone the explanation – is the product of the researcher.

It is not simply that the research bears the stamp of the researcher; rather, the research process and its product can be regarded as the result of *individual creative* human action, in much the same way that we speak of Van Gogh's painting as being "a Van Gogh". What is being created are not paintings, but meaning (Smith, 1992). Like paintings, however, those meanings can be held up for examination by others, and with the intention of sharing them.

From the hermeneutic interpretivist perspective, even the acts of noticing, and

selecting, data (though not all data selection is consciously reflected upon) can be seen as essentially *individual* and *creative* ones. As a result, it becomes an important research activity for the researcher to ask: "Why did I attend to that particular event or idea?", "Why did I notice it?", What makes it "count" for me as data?", "What meaning do I attach to it?", "What significance did it have for me that made me "notice" it even before I understood it?"

This also helps to explain the difficulty experienced by this writer, at least, in differentiating between the act (and the techniques) of data collection and the act (and the techniques) used for data analysis. In a functionalist research paradigm, one can generally make this distinction quite easily – one interviews people, or conducts a controlled social experiment, or administers a questionnaire, and then one applies to that data techniques of classification, interpretation and analysis (such as coding and statistical analysis).

The interpretive perspective at least directly acknowledges that in the moment of asking a question and listening to the answer, the researcher has created, collected and already commenced the process of interpreting the data, and may even be in the process of developing a theory about it.

As well as blurring the boundaries of the process of data generation, the hermeneutic view also potentially complicates our conception of what constitutes "data". Thus Jones (1985) speaks of "talk" (meaning "casual" conversations as well as "planned" interviews) and Cunningham (1988) of "contextual locating" (meaning attending and speaking at conferences, the discussions academics have at staff meetings, and the kind of experience that comes from simply "hanging around" a particular group of people over a period of time).

These are seen not just as locations in which data are collected, but as ways in which

data are created. In the hermeneutic view, there is no aspect of the researcher's experience which is not potentially "grist for the mill".

Which leads to the interesting question of what is happening when the data is extended to include the researcher's experience of reflecting on him or herself.

The researcher as the subject of research

In processes of action learning, it is easy to see the processes of double-loop learning, third position thinking and critical incident analysis; the subject of reflection is the behaviour of the learner – including actions taken in the external world that others can see and evaluate, and feelings and thoughts that are experienced directly "on the inside" only by the learner, but which can be described to others.

In action research, the researcher is also encouraged to reflect on their own behaviour, both external and internal behaviour. External behaviour is evaluated in terms of its impact and effectiveness on others. Internal behaviour is also examined, using the sort of dialectic approaches described earlier (Dick, 1993) and the sort of analysis of logic (whether inductive, deductive or abductive) which Revans prescribed in System Beta (Revans, 1982).

However, as this writer has already mentioned, she has the uneasy feeling that the attention given to the researcher's behaviour in action research is often driven by a perceived need to control and contain it.

She would certainly assert that even for many of whose who write about action research and practise it – let alone the positivists of the world – it would be difficult to concede that there are times – and possibly a great many times – when the researcher is, for all practical purposes, the subject of their own research.

This goes beyond allowing that the researcher's experience, feelings, thoughts and behaviour are relevant and admissible data. It goes beyond acknowledging that the researcher both selects and creates the data which are studied. It requires us to acknowledge that the researcher is engaged in self-examination and that this is a legitimate part of the research process. In interpretivist terms, this is about constructing and/or developing understanding of oneself, about developing *meaning* in relation to oneself.

This kind of thinking led this writer, eventually, to such hermeneutic research techniques as story-telling (Reason & Hawkins, 1988), narrative (Yin, 1987) and biography (Ferrarotti, 1981).

Although there are some famous procedures for the "researcher-as-subject-of-own-research" – Freud's analysis of his own dreams is a case in point (see Jones', 1961, biography of Freud) – it was this writer's experience that when she told academic colleagues that, increasingly she found she was researching the development of her own praxis and theory, most shuddered and asked, "How are you going to get away with *that*?"

Instead of shuddering, Morgan (1983) has suggested that what is needed are research strategies that acknowledge and allow us to deal constructively with the relativism that flows from the notion of researcher-as-learner, researcher-as-creator, researcher-as-end-product, and researcher-as-subject-of-own-research.

> Or to put the matter in a more positive way, we need to find a way of dealing with the *possibilities* that relativism signifies. In order to find such an approach, it is necessary to reframe our view of knowledge in a way that gets beyond the idea that knowledge is in some sense foundational and can be evaluated in an absolute way, for it is this idea that ultimately leads us to try and banish the uncertainty associated with relativism, rather than simply to deal with it as an inevitable process through which knowledge is gathered (Morgan, 1983, pp372-373).

There are a number of writers who have discussed the subject of researcher-as-the-subject-of-research, including those represented in Zuber-Skerritt's book which was not published until 1992. Up until that time, this researcher had a sense of being pretty much "self-directed" in her search for ideas on the subject. To describe this book as being a comfort to this writer is a considerable understatement, The notion that the researcher quite explicitly needs to be the subject of research is explored by a number of contributors (as in Kemmis' description of critical research and critical learning alluded to earlier). The work of McTaggart (1992, p15) was also very helpful in this way, including his comment that, "We know too little about how people make use of their own experience and the experience of others to inform their work, and still less about how tacit knowledge and the subconscious interact with interpretation of experience in real work situations."

A writer who *did* help at an earlier stage in this writer's thinking was Cunningham (1988), whose interest is in researching self-managed learning. His work provided considerable inspiration for this writer, given the similarity of his research interests with her own. Cunningham has coined the term "wholistic interactive research" to cover five interconnecting methodologies: collaborative research, dialogic research, experiential research, action research and contextual locating.

Collaborative research involves a group of people who together pursue an investigation of a topic. The initiating researcher does not dictate the process of the research activity. He distinguishes two types of collaborative research: Type I (consonant with co-operative inquiry) where researchers study their own experience in the group of which they are all a part. Type II is where people come together to study experience that has occurred *outside* the group.

Dialogic research centres around two-person interaction and uses the dialogue as a

mode of "finding out". It is a special case of collaborative research, but Cunningham observes that there is something about the two-person mode that makes it distinctively different, since there is no group process to attend to, only the interpersonal relationship of two people.

Experiential research uses as its focus the direct experience of the person/researcher. He argues that experiential research in an essential feature of human science activity, and that researchers as persons should learn to be effective researchers of their own experience. His view is that personal experiential research "is not old-fashioned introspectionism, as it is based on experience and not on armchair theorising or limited projections" (Cunningham, 1988, p165). To be useful, however, in his view it needs to be linked to other methods: as well as talking with others (dialogic or collaborative research) one needs to test one's personal research in action.

Action research he identifies with the work of Lewin (1946) while *contextual locating* refers to the process by which one:

> feeds into and off the context within which one operates; so in this research there are people working in the field, writing about it, discussing it at conferences, etc. The theory developed in and through the other four methods will in part come out of this wider context and also feed into it. Hence there is an iterative, to-and-fro process which provides the basis for testing and evolving theory (Cunningham, 1988, p166).

Cunningham's map of contextual locating is reproduced in Figure 2.

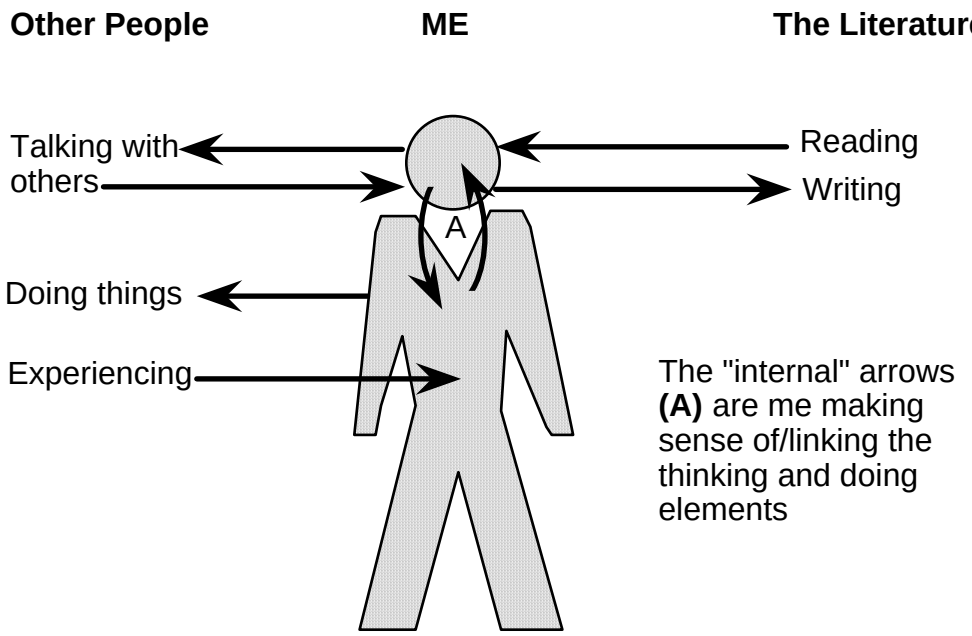


Figure 2: Contextual locating (Cunningham, 1988, p168)

While these ideas are useful in suggesting that nothing a researcher does is "inadmissible data", they do not, of themselves, solve what Heron calls "a critical paradox" of (action) research: "that I am seeking to validate research propositions by undergoing experiences that are picked out, defined and identified in terms of those same propositions" (Heron, 1988, p59) and suggests the need for "bracketing": "a competence that prevents such validation from merely being self-fulfilling and circular... it means that we can, as it were, hold these constructs in mental suspension, and allow the phenomena to speak somewhat for themselves" (Heron, 1988, p59).

Zuber-Skerritt (1992) alludes to "critical attitude" while Reason (1988) has used the terms "critical knowing" and "critical subjectivity" to describe the quality that research strategies need to have. "Critical subjectivity is a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, nor do we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed and swept along by it; rather we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process" (Reason, 1988, p12).

This writer has come to understand "critical subjectivity and knowing" as involving the researcher in a delicate balance between fully knowing the individuality of the

meaning or sense one makes of one's own and other's data (including experience), and being able to stand aside from that individuality and put it in some larger or different perspective, which places a different meaning on the data. This is a paradoxical skill involving full recognition and ownership of "self" and distancing from self in order to develop meaning. It is an important skill for the learner intent on understanding and changing self (as later chapters will assess). For the researcher, it means being able to discriminate precisely between what is generated by oneself and is of value and meaning to oneself, and what is of value and creates meaning or knowledge for others.

This is not easy to do. As Heron (1988) has observed, to

> take an idea down into experience, whether to notice what it distorts or what it omits, is a tricky business... Making the experiential test (of a conclusion or idea born out of reflection on experience) involves them (the researcher) in a change of being. They become different: the idea is no longer just grasped by them intellectually – they have lived through it, they know it connaturally, as the philosophers say. They have worn it as the garment of their doing... " (Heron, 1988, p50)

"Critical subjectivity" represents a very high order of the "third position thinking", and "double-loop learning" and critical incident analysis processes described earlier. Engagement with the research task and with the people involved means engagement with oneself, with one's own theories, assumptions, values, confusions, generalisations, filters, strengths and weaknesses.

At the very least, "critical subjectivity" requires that we become aware of what we are doing – that we catch ourselves in the act – and consider carefully the stamp that we wish to leave and the behaviour we wish to enact. In the collaborative work implied by the action research paradigm, we are encouraged to take our clients, participants and other collaborators into the same state of "critical knowing" – an extraordinary feat of double-loop learning if one is capable of it.

For example, in developing a construct or theory, "the inquirers need to believe in an idea enough to get experientially involved in it, and at the same time they need to be unattached to it, watchful for shortcomings, noticing more than belief in it entails, and holding alternative ideas available in the mind at the ready" (Heron, 1988, pp 50–51).

This researcher certainly experienced, at first hand, the sustained creative tension which arises from somehow standing aside from oneself, watching and listening to oneself both in action and in the process of theory development. The next section describes some of the reflective techniques that helped her – or have helped others – to create some of the quality of critical subjectivity and critical knowing.

The preparation of this entire chapter is regarded by the writer as one of the most significant activities and products of the study. She approached it not simply as an exercise in designing methodology or in literature review, but as a substantial part of the development of her professional praxis. Her *understanding* of social research was enhanced enormously by engaging with the issues described so far. Her *practice* – both as a researcher, learner and facilitator of others' learning – was considerably extended by thinking about and applying the reflective techniques described in the next section.

Reflective techniques as tools in research activity

This writer uses the term "reflective techniques" to encompass a number of processes – including data recognition and selection, data generation, data capture and interpretation. In the terms that were used earlier, she sees reflection as a creative action on the part of the researcher that cannot be neatly categorised as "data collection" or "data analysis", since it incorporates elements of both. In fact, the nearest this researcher could get to making that distinction was to identify particular situations in which data were to be generated (such as "supervision" sessions with

students or in interviews with managers) and to nominate those as "sources of data" – although in practice, she thought of them as being "learning opportunities" as much as "research situations".

This section begins with an attempt to describe what the process of reflection is, continues with an account of the reflective techniques which this researcher brought to the research process from her experience of action learning, and continues with a review of some of the reflective techniques offered in the research literature – generally from writers with an hermeneutic perspective.

At the outset, this writer brought to the research process a reasonably well-developed knowledge of – and experience in – applying the functionalist research paradigm. As the study proceeded, she developed the repertoire of reflective techniques she used in facilitating her own learning and the learning of others. As still more time passed, she learned more about other research paradigms and came to regard these action learning techniques as useful and appropriate techniques given her subject matter. She also learned about techniques for reflection that had been developed by hermeneutic interpretivists, in an effort to introduce that quality of "critical subjectivity" described already.

From a research perspective, the intention in using these techniques is not to "take the person out of the equation" or even to simply acknowledge and understand what the person is doing so that we can "factor the person out"; but rather to find a way to enhance the quality and richness of our knowledge generation process by allowing it be a fully human and creative act, while at the same time identifying and taking responsibility for our own idiosyncratic contribution. Since one of the purposes of research is to develop our collective understanding and wisdom – unlike therapy or management development which are aimed at enhancing individual understanding and competence – it is important that we put our contribution – our creative act – into

context so that others can make judgements about whether the meaning we have created is applicable and useful to them in creating their own meaning.

These words are the writer's own, but they have been embellished by the use of italics to clearly communicate the writer's understanding of the concepts being discussed.

A description of reflection:

Barry Smith in his book *Management Development in Australia* (1992) offers both a definition of reflection and a description of how reflection contributes to the development of meaning. There is a large body of literature in the field of education, philosophy and psychology dealing with how meaning and knowledge are constructed by human minds, much of it very sophisticated (see for example, Bruner, 1966; Bateson, 1973; Belenky et al, 1986; and Donaldson, 1992).

Smith's more elementary treatment of the subject has been used here because it is easily accessible and interesting to this writer as an attempt to explain the mechanics of reflection to practitioners in the field of training and development.

He defines reflection as:

> the processing of data to create or modify meaning schemas... Meaning schemas are learned cognitive structures by which we give order or meaning to events which impinge on us. They determine the way the individual views and orders his or her world. Since meaning schemas are learned, they are neither static nor universal, and are subject to continuing confirmation or negation... (Smith, 1992, p29).

Having identified reflection as a creative act (the creation of meaning), Smith suggests that the critical phase of the creation process involves identifying and linking salient events into a meaning schema. Once they are developed, they begin to influence the perception of subsequent events and the creation of subsequent schemas, although they

themselves can be modified by subsequent schemas and events.

Acknowledging that this is a highly idiosyncratic process, Smith lists some of the factors that influence the creation of meaning schemas and the linking of events to those schemas. In listing factors, he is describing some of the dynamics of reflection. The factors include:

- time connections which lead to the engagement of cause-effect relationships or simply to the coupling of ideas and events;
- need states and emotions which influence the meanings attached to events;
- completion, meaning the resolution of incongruence;
- value-fit, the sense that something is "right" or "wrong";
- reasoning and logic patterns and techniques;
- application – the idea helps us to do something or achieve something of value to us;
- novelty or surprise – as in some forms of humour – which reveals unexpected meaning;
- the context and source of an event (a person or place) which influences the meanings attached and created;
- insight, the illumination or sense of discovery that is experienced when an idea explains something of importance;
- the cultural associations which are attached to meaning schemas.

In the day-to-day process of acting, thinking and feeling any or all of these factors are at work, consciously or unconsciously influencing whether particular events are "attended to" or noticed, and if noticed, given meaning and significance by being attached to or associated with an existing schema; and also influencing the creation and re-arrangement of the meaning schemas through which subsequent events are interpreted.

The essentially creative nature of even basic "attending" behaviour has been nicely captured by Donaldson (1992):

> Human thought deals with how things are, or at least with how they seem to us to be, but it does this in ways that typically entail some sense of how they are not – or not yet. It deals with actuality and with possibility; but some recognition of possibility is already entailed even in the discovery of actuality whenever this is achieved by the characteristically human means of asking questions. Is it like this? Or is it perhaps like that? (Donaldson, 1992, p9).

In practice, this is of course a very complex process, the dynamics of which still challenge cognitive psychology. Ulric Neisser's (1966) observation of twenty five years ago still stands – it is difficult to explain how human beings ever notice or "register" events for which they have no existing schema. Until we understand this, we will never be able to build a computer that recognises the handwriting or voice of "just anybody" who wanders along and for which the machine isn't specifically programmed. In this respect, the human brain has yet to be replicated.

Whatever the precise mechanism, in the act of conscious reflection, the researcher to a greater or lesser extent takes charge of the process of constructing meaning. Reflection not only provides a way of creating meaning, but of testing that meaning. The schemas can be used to ask "what if" questions and generate future scenarios, with the purpose of suggesting appropriate action, predicting possible outcomes of that action and evaluating those outcomes. Meaning schemas allow us to create

expectation, beliefs and fantasies of events which we have never experienced and may never experience, as well as to interpret experience and direct behaviour in the here-and-now. They also allow us to place new meaning on events which are part of our past experience – even to re-invent or remake those experiences in the way that Mintzberg (1987) describes: discerning and constructing patterns of meaning in past experiences which are only available to us because they are *past*.

As Smith observes, reflection is basic to all the phases of the action learning and action research cycles. Because the construction of meaning is happening at all phases, the researcher has the chance to become conscious of and to some extent direct the process. The Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) action research methodology mentioned earlier in the chapter, in common with many others, separates out reflection as a particular part of the cycle: plan, act, observe and reflect. This writer believes that this understates the role that it can play in the whole process, beginning with the basic act of noticing or attending to the data.

In its most developed form, as Smith (1992, p39) observes, reflection becomes a meta-process: the person is reflecting about their own reflection process, deliberately and consciously using reflection (the creation and development of meaning) to understand the way they create and develop meaning (the way they reflect). This represents the most developed form of what this writer came to label as "third position thinking" (mentioned earlier). In third position, the person becomes self-reflective, literally applying the action learning cycle to themselves: *noticing* aspects of their internal and external behaviour, and *evaluating* the impact of those behaviours on self and others, *asking* "Why do I do this?", "What's driving my behaviour?" and *planning* to do something different "next time". All of this enhances self-understanding, it develops and creates "self-meaning". At the point where the person is reflecting about how they create meaning, they are arguably in a very advanced state of "critical subjectivity", examining the very processes by which one creates meaning of both the internal and

external worlds – of self and others.

The attainment of this meta-skill of self-reflection does not, of course, mean that we can, through our own effort and "critical knowing" of ourselves, easily or completely overhaul all our meaning schemas and "remake" ourselves. At the end of the day we are, as Berger and Luckman (1966) point out, powerfully influenced and constrained by the constructs we carry with us into adulthood, and so there is every chance that we will *remake ourselves in our own image*. But arguably, it helps us in the process of research – and everyday living – to understand the relativity of our own schema, and "critical subjectivity" can help us to be aware of that relativism, and its unique nature. This writer would argue that this is also important in the process of learning and change – a proposition that will be addressed later in the thesis.

The action reflection techniques of learning:

In Chapter 4, the writer describes how she was first exposed to the concepts of adult learning (see, for example Knowles, 1978) and in particular action-based learning. She worked with academic colleagues who were trying to make clear to graduate students the concept which this writer later called "third position thinking". They had been very much influenced by the work of Argyris (1982, 1983, 1985) and Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978, 1989) – particularly the concepts of implicit theories which guide behaviour, the defensive routines which prevail in social interaction and which make some subjects "undiscussable" and "double-loop learning" which involves recognising and surfacing the theories and routines which limit effective individual and collective action.

Although being applied by the present writer's collegiate group in the context of management education, Argyris called his approach "action science", arguing that by creating a more open relationship between the researcher and those "researched", and

by surfacing and confronting the rules which govern their interaction, valid data is more likely to be collected. The techniques suggested by Argyris and practised by the writer's collegiate group are mentioned here because of the potential assistance they provide in achieving "critical subjectivity".

The concepts are not necessarily easy to grasp, and the group was using the term "meta-me" to describe the process of standing aside from oneself to observe and hear oneself in action, and to catch glimpses of the implicit theories, assumptions and values driving the behaviour.

To use the "meta-me", students were encouraged to imagine that they were capturing themselves on video- or audio-tape, and able to replay the tape slowly and repeatedly after the event. Sometimes this was achieved by literally using video- and audio-tape, but most commonly by processes of visualising past events in the imagination, by role-playing them, and by "journalising" them – that is, writing them down. The critical incident analysis described earlier is an example of this. The idea was that by writing things down or "replaying" them in other ways, one could see oneself for better or worse, recognise what might be done differently and plan – even rehearse – what that would involve.

From her own experience, the writer knows only too well that to try to be conscious of this process, to keep track of it and from time to time manage it, by deliberately shifting the gears from first, to second or third position – and back again – requires will, skill and technique.

The skills involved are numerous, and the writer's short list of required skills would include: being able to frame and ask questions; to be both patient and persistent in seeking answers; to find the time and develop the discipline of reflection; to be able to live with the uncertainty, ambiguity – and sometimes risk – implied by asking some

questions and then not finding immediate or obvious answers; to force oneself to third position, even when that is hard and uncomfortable; to live with crises of confidence in oneself and others; to stand back and sort out the difference between internal and external data, and understand the point at which they merge so completely that separation is impossible; to take responsibility for the unseen and unintended impacts of one's behaviour (both on oneself and on others); to sometimes use oneself as a litmus test (for example, to assume that if a situation is making me uncomfortable, it may be making others feel the same way); to avoid premature judgments; and sometimes, switch off completely, go to first position and just do what comes naturally!

Argyris (1990) offers some specific guidance and techniques to assist in articulating implicit theories and revealing defensive routines, and Senge (1990) has identified as a "learning discipline" the skills involved in surfacing and testing "mental models" (a concept which incorporates tacit assumptions, beliefs, implicit theories and other meaning schema). Pope and Deniculo (1992) have tackled the issue from a different perspective, tapping into the thinking of the psychologist George Kelly (1955) whose "personal construct theory" reflects a philosophical stance that human beings are continuously engaged in the process of constructing and re-constructing their reality and that "no-one needs to be a victim of his biography" (Kelly, 1955, p15). His stance as therapist and educator was to encourage clients/learners to articulate their world views and regard them as hypotheses potentially open to invalidation: "Finding better ways to help a person reconstrue his life so that he need not be the victim of his past" (Kelly, 1955, p23). Pope and Deniculo (1992, p106) have themselves used Kelly's repertory grid technique to surface personal constructs, plus techniques of concept mapping and "snakes", but they also cite techniques like stimulus recall using videotapes (Woods, 1981); diaries, logs or journals (Warner, 1971); illuminative incident analysis (Pope, 1981) and self narrative and ethnography (Elbaz, 1981).

In time, as described in Chapter 4, this writer came to develop her own set of techniques for undertaking this work, in the context of facilitating learning. However, she also came to appreciate the value of all of these approaches in helping herself as researcher to both know and stand aside from her own construction of reality – to be "critically subjective".

An example of a technique used in this way is a set of trigger questions designed to reveal the researcher's real intention in engaging in a piece of behaviour: was the real intent to tell something? to observe? to look good? to seek information? to avoid conflict or to win the support of others?

In order to use these sorts of techniques most effectively, Senge (1990) suggests that most people need the assistance of other people using what he calls the discipline of "team learning". Team learning skills include inquiring about people's ideas, assumptions and intentions; suspending judgement while they speak; actively listening to and acknowledging them; checking that the other person has understood properly; avoiding advocating one's own view; respecting differences in personal ideas, values and behaviour; guaranteeing confidentiality; and acting as colleagues not competitors.

These skills have been mentioned here not only because of their potential value in enhancing individual learning, but because of their relevance to the use of reflective techniques in research. This writer would assert that many of the reflective research techniques described next would not be effective without the use of these basic learning skills.

Reflective techniques in the research literature:

As well as being prepared to apply reflective learning techniques to the research task, the writer also became aware of techniques recommended by colleagues and described in the research literature which help to create "critical subjectivity" or "critical

knowing", and which heighten the researcher's awareness of the distinctions between the invention of personal meaning and knowledge and meaning and knowledge of value to others. For convenience, rather than conceptual purity – since the techniques overlap in practice – they have been grouped as techniques for *contexting* the construction of meaning, *cycling* reflective activities, *drawing out* meaning, *enriching* meaning and *constructively challenging* meaning.

a) Contexting

Earlier in this chapter, the writer discussed the value of *contexting* as a research skill – explicitly describing for oneself and others the context in which action is being taken, meaning is being created and theories constructed. In the act of description, the researcher not only brings the context to life but distances him or herself from the experience. A colleague added to this the practice of *data checking*: asking the researcher (individually or with the help of others) to reflect on what he or she recognises as "relevant data". This can be done by asking questions like: "What counts as data for *me*?", "What do I even notice", "What do I attend to?", "What sort of data will I go on creating (for example, by asking questions) or allow others to create (by clearing the space or setting the scene for action, or allowing action that others have initiated to continue)?" These questions can be directed to both internal data (like the feelings, thoughts and behaviour of the researcher) and external data and serve to highlight the individuality of the researcher's data.

b) Research cycling

Research cycling (Heron, 1988) is designed to help identify and manage subjectivity in the broadest sense – that is, by reminding the researcher to balance evaluation and diagnosis with action and reality testing (and vice versa). The importance of this can hardly be overstated, since no amount of disciplined "standing aside" from oneself can

compensate for a failure to carry thought and meaning into action with the regularity and discipline that are fundamental to action research. However, the process also serves to create the conditions for "critical subjectivity". It consists of deliberately designing the overall research strategy to incorporate the cycle depicted in Figure 1. For example, there might be whole phases of action in the form of participant observation in the field, followed by or interspersed with phases of interpreting and evaluating what has been said, heard or done; focussing and re-focussing the diagnosis of what's "really" happening; and planning further action.

Research cycling is not just about these larger phases of the research strategy, however. It is also about using the cycle in a disciplined way as part of particular interventions within the overall design, so that, for example, at the end of each week or each day – or even each hour of activity in some cases – the researcher engages in the process of action, evaluation, diagnosis and planning.

Used very regularly in this way, it is this writer's experience that the researcher moves from a stage of having to be "reminded to cycle" the research design to a stage of doing it so naturally that it becomes a "meta-skill" – it becomes almost automatic to "stand aside" in one's head from the action one is involved in, and observe and evaluate it as it happens. At that point, reflection has become truly integrated into every aspect of the action research cycle. This does not by itself mean that the researcher is aware of the constructs and meaning schemas he or she is using at the time; but it certainly sensitises the researcher to the limitations and possibilities created by their own behaviour.

Research cycling can be individual, collective or interactive. In individual cycling, the researcher or inquirer – to use Heron's term – has to operate as their own control mechanism, implementing the cycle on a serial basis over minutes, days, weeks, months and/or years. In collective research cycling, the inquirers operate as a group at

each phase of the cycle – either experiencing and reflecting together, and interactively, or doing things individually but side-by-side in the same space.

In interactive research cycling, the intention is to achieve a balance between some individual research cycling and some aspect of collective research cycling. This can be achieved in different ways – for example, separate individual cycles of experience and reflection can be followed by collective reflection, in which each person's individual findings are shared for feedback and discussion, and in which the content and method of the next individual cycles is planned collectively (Heron, 1988, p45).

c) Drawing out, enriching and constructively challenging meaning

The value of collective and interactive cycling is that the individual's own "learning" can be fully *drawn out* and acknowledged; shared and put side-by-side with the "knowing" of others, so that individual meaning is *enriched*, enhanced and extended by interaction with others; and evaluated and *constructively challenged* by others. (This concept is fundamental to the process of action *learning*, as pointed out by Revans, 1982, among others, but it is being suggested here that it is also important in the research context.)

For these things to happen, other, more specific skills and techniques are required. The learning disciplines of using "meta-me", team learning, surfacing and testing mental models, and action science – described earlier – are all relevant here; in fact, this writer would argue that these things are unlikely to happen, or be sustained, effectively without them.

Open-ended, non-directive interviewing (Jones, 1985) is a research technique which specifically encourages the researcher to focus on exploring and fully drawing out the ideas and perceptions of another person by using the attending and listening skills –

and respectful, unconditional attitude – articulated by Carl Rogers (1961) among others. Dialogic inquiry (as described by Cunningham, 1988) takes this to a two-way reflective process, involving reciprocal and mutual attending and listening in order to draw out meaning.

Barry Turner's (1988) approach to the development of "grounded theory" is a research technique which provides a disciplined way in which collective meaning and knowledge can be developed from individual statements and expressions of meaning. As he practises it, grounded theory construction involves a group of individuals in identifying and themselves reacting to words and phrases used by themselves and others, as a means of building hypotheses about how people actually behave, which can then be tested by observation and other means. Whether examining statements made by themselves or others, he makes the point that the researcher must actively contribute to the process by being much more than merely a "human tape recorder". All of those involved in the analysis of the data bring distinctive perspectives to the inquiry, as well as their own values and intellectual passions (Turner, 1988, p115) but in walking together and paying close and rigorous attention to the data as presented, they collectively develop new patterns of understanding and meaning from the data.

Other research techniques encourage active evaluation and constructive challenging of the researcher's theories, interpretations and conclusions. So Heron (1988, pp49-55) urges the need to find out whether there is "coherence in action" – in other words, to take the coherent viewpoint which progressively develops out of dialogic or grounded theory or related techniques, and expose it to explicit and specific testing by application in "real-life" situations. "Falsification" involves maintaining vigilance in watching for how ideas fall short when taken into practical experience. Should the researcher tend to collude in not reporting any "corrective aspects" of their experience in applying the concepts, a formal "devil's advocate" procedure can be instituted, which specifically invites rigorous attempts at falsification, and encouragers

researchers to seek out doubts even when they are most convinced of the "rightness" of their propositions. In taking the role of devil's advocate, others are invited to check the logic processes – whether inductive, deductive or abductive – through which the researcher arrived at a particular concept, idea or conclusion.

The challenge of sustaining critical subjectivity

The application of these techniques, as suggested earlier, requires of all involved parties both skill and will; including the capacity to adopt the "meta-me", to rigorously apply the team learning skills, to surface and test mental models, and to use the action science methods of Argyris to articulate and explore implicit theories and defensive routines.

Heron (1988) has suggested that the researcher also needs to be able to tolerate what he calls the sequence of "chaos and order". He observes that when researchers attempt to be open, to challenge, and avoid collusion, then clarity and divergence of thought and expression "may well collapse into confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity, disorder and chaos – with most or all of the inquirer's feeling lost to a greater or lesser degree" (Heron, 1988, p52). He concludes that it is important for researchers to be able to accept chaos, and have a high tolerance for ambiguity and confusion. He compares the inquiry process to the dissipative structure in organic and inorganic chemistry (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) in which new order is created by perturbation. While researchers cannot plan for this, and cannot say, "now let's have some chaos," they can plan to be creatively divergent, and learn to stay with the chaos, to recognise and accept it, without "anxiously trying to clean it up, without getting trapped by fear into premature and restrictive intellectual closure" (Heron, 1988, p53).

Similarly Percy (1992) has described what she calls the state of "not knowing" in the context of research activity:

> To arrive at a point of creating meaning out of the data collected without starting with an hypothesis, required an ability to tolerate ambiguity and a willingness to be vulnerable during the action research project and subsequent stage of theorising. The mental state needed before *knowing* could be arrived at was that of *not-knowing*. I had to trust myself to not know exactly what was being sought, to wait until the figure-ground formations developed into patterns. The notion is similar to Senge's (1990) concept of "suspending assumptions" as a prerequisite for dialogue, and Vaill's (1989) discussion of the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, that is, "non-action", of not forcing movement but of going with the flow. The state of not-knowing, like incubation, was not passive. Knowing was born of not-knowing and non-action (Percy, 1992, p71).

Heron also highlights the need to manage the "unaware projections" – created by fear and defensiveness – which in his view can be triggered by the very process of inquiring into human interactions and behaviour. He compares this with the "counter-transference" to which therapists are said by some to be prone in therapy (Brown, 1961). In essence, this refers to the possibility that the researcher will see – or see and reject – in others' statements and behaviour qualities which they have difficulty in acknowledging or accepting in themselves. The researcher might also, as a result of their own unaware projections, "research extensively trivial and peripheral bits of behaviour. They may manipulate and deceive their experimental subjects. They may never ask their subjects how they construe the experimental situation and give meaning to their actions within it" (Heron, 1988, p55).

Even researchers who are aware of this kind of defensiveness, in Heron's view, may still be subject to disruption from all kinds of unfinished emotional business, which may in turn impact on the choice of their research subject and how they plan and manage the research cycle. It might result in lapses in recording data; the neglect of validity procedures; emotional and intellectual difficulty in noticing and reporting important experiences; becoming bored, distracted or rebellious about the whole research program; dysfunctional collusions of various kinds, and so on. Since it may be difficult for researchers to recognise or deal with the source of their own defensive behaviour, Heron suggests that time needs to be set aside for reflective – including

cathartic – activities like journal writing, meditation, group and individual process sessions.

Percy (1992) pursued a similar line of thinking in her research activity, observing that data generated by personal assumptions, values and beliefs that are not within the personal awareness of the researcher cannot be regarded with that combined quality of "knowingness" and objectivity which is the hallmark of "critical subjectivity".

She set herself the task of "non-defensive reflection", commenting that:

> discerning personal filters is like tuning into one instrument out of a full orchestra so that the listener can discern the flute within an orchestra of sound... I should add that I was not often quick at recognising projection, nor discovering choice, and that it was a difficult process. Argyris' (1990) model of espoused theory and theory-in-use provides a framework to explore this further. To re-own my projections can be described as my espoused theory. To convert this into a theory-in-use required a jump of the greatest significance, both cognitively and emotionally. The "jump" was rarely quick and to be honest, not often made at the time but with the safety of retrospection. It involved a long process of reflection to move out of one frame of reference to another and required a shift in my psychological state to one conducive to non-defensive reflection. Non-defensive reflection is crucial to closing the gap between the theory-in-use and espoused theory (Percy, 1992, pp68-69).

In Gestalt terms (Goodman et al, 1972) non-defensive reflection involves allowing the Gestalt to form and reform, with different elements of the Gestalt at different times becoming part of the figure (central to attention) and at other times part of the ground (the background "noise" in the orchestra).

As well as accessing personal filters and projections, through non-defensive reflection, the researcher might also access the extent to which we tend to fill up the gaps in the data we collect about others. It is not often the case that we ever get a whole picture of an organisation or hear the full story of an incident, as seen by all parties. Most often we rely on fragments, but are quick to complete the Gestalt by expanding our impression of a person or group to the whole organisation, and sometimes relying on

metaphor and analogy developed from the fragments to describe – or even – explain the whole.

The value of co-operative inquiry in sustaining critical subjectivity

The reflective techniques – and the skills required to use them effectively – described in this section involve, in differing combinations, both individual and co-operative effort. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, action research as a paradigm allows for periods of both kinds of effort, and at the very least requires balance between the two. There are other research paradigms within the interpretevist perspective that do not seek the same kind of balance. Experiential research (Cunningham, 1988) is a form of research which uses as its focus the direct experience of the person/researcher: in other words, the researcher is the "subject". Cunningham differentiates between two kinds of experiential research: a personal form, where researcher and subject are one and the same, and dialogic, where experience and/or response to experience is shared with others.

While quick to defend the value of investigating one's own behaviour and personal practice as a means of contributing to collective knowledge, Cunningham points out that a research paradigm that simply involves the researcher in reflection about themselves, without dialogue with others in any form, is not going to be given the same status as research which involves dialogue with others – even if it is the researcher's own behaviour which is being researched in both instances.

At the other extreme is the research paradigm known as "co-operative inquiry" (Reason, 1988) which involves collaborative research activity of a particular kind. In keeping with their views on the strength of social context in shaping the contents of consciousness, Kemmis (1992) and Zuber-Sherritt (1992) suggest that critical self-reflection must of necessity involve others in collaborative analysis, in order to have

any chance of penetrating the illusory definition of reality which may have been socially conferred.

Like action research, co-operative inquiry removes the distinction between researchers – the people who design, manage, and draw conclusions from the research – and subjects – the people involved in the action and experience which the research is about. Researcher and subject are "arm-in-arm" and the researcher's behaviour is also the subject of research. Co-operative inquiry goes still further, by suggesting that there is no distinction at all between researcher and subject or client – both devise, manage and draw conclusions from the research and both undergo the experiences and perform the actions that are being researched. In action research, while much is shared, it may still be the case that the researcher is an adviser to or consultant to the client as subject. Such a distinction is not made at all in co-operative inquiry.

Although not using co-operative inquiry as the exclusive research paradigm, this researcher incorporated some of the features of co-operative inquiry into her research activity. Reason's detailed description of co-operative inquiry is worth quoting, partly for that reason, but primarily because his description effectively brings to life many of the ways in which reflective techniques and skills can be applied in the context of dialogue. The cycle of co-operative inquiry as described by Reason (1988) is very similar to the action learning and action research cycles described earlier:

> A group of co-researchers meet to inquire into some aspect of their life and work. They discuss and agree *what* it is they wish to research, what *ideas* and *themes* they may bring to the inquiry; what kind of *research action* they will undertake to explore these ideas; how to observe, record, measure and otherwise gather their experience for further reflection. Stage 1 is primarily in the realm of propositional knowledge.
>
> In Stage 2 they take these decisions about research action into their lives; they engage in whatever behaviour has been agreed, note the outcomes whether these be physical, psychological, interpersonal, or social; and record their discoveries. Stage 2 may involve self-observation, reciprocal observation of other members of the inquiry group, or other agreed methods of recording experience. It is primarily in the realm of practical knowledge.

As part of this application the co-researchers (Stage 3) become fully immersed in their practice. They encounter each other and their world directly, as far as possible without preconception, bracketing off any prejudicial influence of the ideas they started with in Stage 1, and so opening themselves to novel experience and discerning so far as possible what is actually happening. They may actually forget that they are taking part in an inquiry. This deep engagement with the subject of the inquiry is in the realm of experiential knowledge, and is the touchstone of the method; it is to be contrasted with the superficial engagement of a subject in orthodox inquiry, who responds to a questionnaire or who is paid to take part in an experiment, while having at most superficial knowledge of, and interest in, what is being studied.

Having engaged deeply with their practice and experience in Stages 2 and 3, the co-researchers return in Stage 4 to reflect on their experience and attempt to make sense of it. This will involve revising and developing the ideas and models with which they entered the first cycle of inquiry, even discarding them and starting anew. This reflection involves a whole range of both cognitive and intuitive forms of knowing; its expression may be primarily propositional, but may also involve stories, pictures, and other ways of giving voice to aspects of experience which cannot be captured in propositions. When this making sense has been

> completed, the co-researchers can consider how to engage on further cycles of inquiry (Reason, 1988, pp4–5, emphases in original).

As will be explored later, this researcher attempted to incorporate the techniques of co-operative inquiry into many aspects of the research strategy. At the outset she had mixed success, because of a failure to grasp that co-operative inquiry means just that – co-operation. Heron (1988, p55) reminds us that truly co-operative inquiry involves sustained authentic collaboration that is not possible if the process is contaminated by differences in power or status.

Heron (1988) observes that an inquiry is most co-operative if it can maximise both the distinctive individuality of the inquirers and the collective reciprocal effect of their working together. Individual reflection needs to be both autonomous and:

> fully open to influence by my experience, your experience, your reflection on my experience, your reflection on my reflection, and vice versa; and all this in relation to each person in the inquiry group. Of course, this is all a counsel of perfection. For any given inquiry one adopts that form of cycling ... that seems best suited to the subject-matter of the inquiry, and that offers an accessible and manageable balance between individual and collective effects (Heron, 1988, pp 45-46).

<u>The creation of meaning through narrative story telling and writing</u>

So far, the writer has attempted to describe some of the ways in which meaning is created through the use of reflective techniques – some deriving from human learning and development applications and some from research applications; some able to be used effectively by the individual in isolation from others, and others dependent on dialogue between people.

As this program of research continued, the researcher had the opportunity to apply these techniques herself and to develop the skills required to use them. Some were used regularly and others only intermittently. But because the paradigm in use was

action research, the research techniques being used became themselves an object of inquiry and reflection. This chapter represents one product of that process: the researcher's statement of the techniques available to – and to varying extents – incorporated in her personal praxis, plus evaluation of the status of the techniques and their value in generating meaning and knowledge which has value for self and others. At the same time as developing her research praxis, the writer was developing her learning praxis: the techniques which she could use effectively in helping herself and other adults to learn and change. She was also trying to develop her understanding as to why these techniques are helpful in developing meaning – whether in a research setting where the objective is the development of knowledge which is useful to others, or in a learning situation, where the objective is change in behaviour through the development of new insight (meaning) in relation to oneself.

Inevitably, these activities became interlinked, so that experiences and conclusions in relation to one of these tasks were applied and used in relation to the other two.

Perhaps the clearest – and most significant – example of this interlinking is the way the writer developed her understanding and use of the reflective processes involved in the creation of narrative – whether written or oral. She came increasingly to appreciate the importance of bringing critical analysis to bear on the products of spontaneous narrative – initially the telling and writing of ideas and, later, the telling and writing of stories.

At the outset, this researcher had a perception of what constituted data collection, data capture and data analysis that was very much the product of many years of academic and applied exposure to the hypothetico-deductive method for knowledge generation within the structural functionalist research paradigm (Kerlinger, 1964). Within the discipline of psychology, she was familiar with and had frequently applied the research tools of experiment, of systematic observation, of surveying and structured

interviewing, and the sampling and statistical techniques used to manipulate and interpret the data produced by those tools.

This background proved to be very useful when operating within the interpretivist framework, since it meant the researcher was used to the discipline of keeping and organising detailed notes and other records; of articulating the conceptual frameworks and structures used in planning interviews and other interventions.

As the work progressed, she became increasingly aware of the extent to which her planned interventions and the actual event were substantially different, and of just how much was invented or created through the process of interaction with others – whether clients, colleagues or anybody else with whom she came into contact. If she had only attended to those things which proceeded as planned, if she had excluded all the accidental or unplanned experiences to which she was subject, she would not have effectively progressed the achievement of any of her tasks – the development of her learning praxis, her research praxis and the theory which would help to explain aspects of both.

Yet the business of capturing "unplanned" data proved to be formidable. She rarely went out without pen and paper and if "caught" without them would use anything that came to hand to make notes while events, experiences and ideas were fresh in her mind. She also became extremely attentive to the words and phrases used by others in conversation. As Jones (1985) puts it:

> all interpretation involves making sense of things – deciding they "mean" something or other ... though we use dress, gesture, touch and even smell to communicate meaning, the most sophisticated way we do it is through language. For this reason interactionist research is typically very interested in what people say. What they say stands for what they mean – what the interactionist is interested in (Jones, 1985, p94).

Talking, as Jones observed, can take place in an interview, but unlike the positivist use

of the interview, the point is not to gain evidence of the speaker's ideas and activities we have decided *we* want to investigate, but to explore the way the other person sees the world. "Unlike the positivist, we want no preconceived ideas. Therefore we want no leading questions. We do not want our actors to go where we lead them. We want to go where they lead us" (Jones, 1985, p94).

The interpretivist's problem is exactly the opposite of that faced by the positivist researcher: instead of clearly imposing a structure on events, the interpretivist is concerned lest any imposed structure destroy the integrity or authenticity of what happens. The "interviewer effect" is such that in subtle and not so subtle ways, the researcher influences the data by telling "the subject" enough to produce what we wanted to hear about anyway.

An overlay on this is the possibility of the co-called "desirability effect" – the proposition (supported by research interviews) that people respond in ways that they think the other person will approve of. To quote Jones yet again:

> since we soon come to believe that others will interpret our behaviour, our *own* interpretative abilities allow us to manipulate the interpretation to suit our vision of ourselves. We use our capacity to be *self-reflective* in order to present the person we wish others to think we are. We play roles in a *creative* way to elicit from others the responses we desire. In effect, we manage, or orchestrate, the responses of others by presenting the image of our self we wish them to hold. We become actors on the stage of life, writing our own lines (Jones, 1985, p95).

Arguably, then, in any encounter – whether devised or unplanned, whether for research purposes or any other, the participants in the action are both creating themselves, and, to use Morgan's (1983) phrase "meeting themselves". To quote him (and partly requote words cited earlier in this thesis):

> In conversation, as in research, we meet ourselves. Both are forms of social interaction in which our choice of words and action return to confront us ... because of the kind of discourse, knowledge or action that we help to generate... When we engage in action research, thought and interpretation, we are not

> simply involved in instrumental processes of acquiring knowledge, but in processes through which we actually make and remake ourselves as human beings (Morgan, 1983, p373).

This researcher's own reflection on these words – and subsequently, on her experiences – had at least two outcomes. One was to understand the importance of capturing words and phases as she and others produced them, and to find effective ways to do that. Writing down everything that is being said can be powerfully reinforcing – and therefore manipulative – of other people's behaviour, just as Jones (1985) reminds us. It can also destroy the sometimes fragile and tentative, and sometimes energetic and robust flow of conversation during which ideas – and meaning – is being explored, created, confirmed or rejected. To rely on one's memory after the event can be difficult, to continually carry round and use a tape-recorder would be both inconvenient and intrusive.

This researcher eventually developed a habit of writing down – almost casually, certainly with economy of movement and gesture – key words and phrases at the time, if it could be done without being dysfunctional in the ways already described. It frequently could be done, because she worked largely in consultancy and academic settings where note taking is not considered a strange or unusual part of social interaction.

She combined this with a habit of using a journal in which to write reflectively and at length about what had happened during events and conversations that day. The journal was often – but not always – used daily for that purpose, but was always used at least weekly throughout the course of the research project. She also continued her existing practice of maintaining case files in relation to each consultancy intervention. This entire process combined quite "messy" features (dozens of manilla folders containing scribbled notes and jottings) with others that were more systematic (journal entries and case files).

The power of narrative in the creation of meaning

What has been described so far is really just the mechanics of keeping track of some of the data created by action research. The second outcome was almost a "quantum leap" in this researcher's own appreciation of just how powerful the acts of spontaneously talking and writing about things that matter to people are – in and of – themselves, not just in describing their realities, but in discovering them, creating them and changing them. In the light of everything that has been said already in this thesis, this perhaps sounds like a trite statement. And in many ways, this was knowledge that the researcher already had, long before she started this research program. She already "knew", from her work as a counsellor that the act of talking about oneself can be very helpful, partly because of the release of emotion that sometimes accompanies it, partly because it feels good to be on the receiving end of somebody else's attention and regard, and partly because in talking about a problem we sometimes gain added insight into what the problem is and how we might deal with it (Carkhuff, 1969). She "knew" that the application of symbols – whether words or picture – to experience and ideas enhances their meaning (Gendlin, 1970). But very often, the application of this knowledge had been overlaid with much structure – the kind of structure that arises when dialogue is used both for learning and research purposes. For example, in training sessions, she would go to great lengths to structure the dialogue – with planned periods for "plenary" discussion, for "brainstorming", for "small group work", for "evaluation", for "role-playing". In research work, she would plan interviews, group discussions, and observational sessions. All this is done with a view to producing an outcome in a particular way, by a particular time. Done effectively, these things take great skill – and much of this writer's attention and energy had gone into the acquisition of these skills.

It has been her experience, however, that these things eventually became sophisticated distractions from her understanding and experiencing the very basic "truth" of Morgan's

statement (cited earlier on p60) that in action research we make and remake ourselves as human beings. She came to believe that she had seriously underestimated – both as a means of generating useful knowledge in research and as a way of facilitating the kind of knowledge that leads to personal learning and change – the value of simply creating the space for telling and listening to people's narrative, to their stories; for telling her own; for writing her own and for reading the stories of others.

In the context of learning, and facilitating learning in others, she was reminded by a colleague of the value of asking people to tell and re-tell – and sometimes tell yet again – the "story" of an incident or relate the history of the group or their own personal contribution to something; she noticed that with each telling, the story is enriched and extended, with a sense of deeper layers of meaning as well as more complete connections with people or things that in the first telling have been in the background of the Gestalt. Themes or patterns of meaning emerge – are noticed or created – which were not always obvious to either teller or listener on the first telling. The telling and re-telling creates a clarity of perspective that incorporates the paradoxical qualities of closeness and distance that "critical knowing" is about. In the telling, one "owns" the story fully and in the same moment, sometimes lets go of it, moves on. She also learned that the way the story is told is often as important as the content of the story – that the teller brings to the telling, no matter how brief it is, important "bits" of themselves and that these small bits often accurately represent and reflect the whole.

The value of these concepts for understanding and explaining and facilitating learning is explored more fully in the following chapters. As a researcher, this writer became very interested in the value of story telling and writing as ways of creating knowledge that would be of value to others as well as herself.

The research value of "talk" has been described by Jones (1985), by Heron (1988), by Cunningham (1988), by Morgan (1983) and by Reason and Hawkins (1988) among

others. Morgan (1983) points out that we sometimes need to go on talking for as long as we need to, until we can't create any more useful meanings, and also highlights the value of re-cycling our records and memories of earlier conversations, re-visiting them with the wisdom of accumulated experience and learning and gaining different perspectives from the re-reading, as we can do from the face-to-face re-telling.

Reason and Hawkins (1988) in *Story-telling as Inquiry* suggest that through *expression*, the meaning of experience is not simply communicated but is discovered and/or created. As a result, the medium and the meaning are essentially interpenetrating – it is foolish to ask the meaning of a story or painting as separate from the work in itself. And sometimes the meaning is released and made manifest by the medium, as expressed by Michelangelo in his statement that he did not create his sculptures, only released them from the stone (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p81).

They also observe that the expression of experiences in Western culture is often seen as belonging to the realm of the creative arts, to the production of the beautiful or entertaining, rather than to the world of science. However, they suggest that psychotherapy – which in the Freudian school grew in part out of the scientific medical tradition – very soon had to incorporate story telling – both in the process of therapy and in its product (the therapeutic case-study).

They observe that in hermeneutics, this does not mean that any study qualifies as science but that science consists of taking studies seriously. Since in their view the "best" studies in everyday life are those which stimulate or stir up people's minds, hearts and souls, and in doing so give them new insights into themselves and their environments, the issue is not just whether story telling is science but whether science can learn to tell good stories (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p83). They then pose the questions: "How do we use stories as inquiry?", "How do we draw forth meaning through story telling?" and "What are the stages in the process of meaning creation in

and through stories?"

They begin by describing the processes followed by social scientists who, having entered a field situation, proceed to gather information, and identify themes based on their experiences there; these themes are woven into a descriptive case-study, which contains within it a "pattern model" of explanation; they then compare and contrast case- studies, perhaps seeking new cases to fill out the categories, so they can develop a typology which might in turn lead to the development of a general theory.

In personal story telling, they suggest a similar progression through levels or stages of development, from basic description to metaphor – which captures meanings and patterns in experience which are difficult to capture in any other way – and, in society as a whole, to the development of ways of understanding or interpreting the world and our experience of it. Personal stories thus, over time, become sagas through entering collective local folklore, and finally fairy tales or myths as their archetypical patterns become increasingly divorced from their original content and context.

> Thus we have two paths of inquiry: from experience through explanation to general theory; and from experience through expression to myth and archetype. Thus we create between them a space for dialogue and for a dialectical development, so that a theme may be illuminated by a story or a theory may clarify a myth. Indeed, some of the most illuminating researchers have used both paths ... (as in) ... Freud's use of the Oedipal myth ... and (the way in which) ... modern physicists have turned to the metaphors of wave and particle to illuminate and express their mathematical formulations of matter and energy (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p85).

They describe some of the techniques they have used to develop story telling as a form of collective inquiry. For example, the story teller would be encouraged to write the story down first, and then read the story aloud, so adding tone and feeling to the words on the page. The listener might then read the story back, using *their* style and tone. The original story begins in this way to take on a separate life of its own, since the original teller hears their own story in a new way, seeing it not only as part of

themselves but also as distant from themselves ("critical subjectivity"). At the same time, the story telling also awakens different reactions and perspectives in the audience. In a workshop situation, people might re-tell the story in their own words or respond with a story of their own.

They observe how quickly a story told in this way moves from belonging to an individual and becomes part of the collective, tapping into shared experiences and values, but also helping to define the boundaries or limits to that shared experiences.

They describe what they have done as creating a *dialectic of expression*, that is quite different from the debate or dialectic between opposing explanations. In the manner of grounded theory, the response of the story teller and the listeners to the telling and re-telling of the story creates a process which catches and contributes different aspects of the whole, both focussing and extending the range and levels of meaning contained in the original story. As a group moves beyond description and seeks for explanation through the story telling process, another dialectic emerges, as expression illuminates explanation and vice versa.

They caution that the task of the researcher is to allow an appropriate balance between the use of story telling to create meaning (whether in the form of description or explanation) and the use of other dialogues and dialectics which deliberately and constructively challenge, test and evaluate the products of the story telling dialectics. For example, a group within an organisation might use story telling to develop metaphors which capture the existing culture of the place, but this metaphor might simply reflect a collective defensive projection which needs to be held up to the light and be seen for what it is – one version of "reality".

As a practice issue, they re-iterate that it is important to establish a method of inquiry which honours expression as well as explanation, that does not rush prematurely into

explanation, that invites individuals and groups to search for the images and metaphors which do justice to their experience, which capture the essence of that experience before seeking to find the reason for it. So the simple invitation to "tell me the story" evokes a different response from "can you tell me why...?"

Story telling and story writing were increasingly included in this writer's research praxis, as well as into her praxis as a learner and learning facilitator. She used story telling and writing very often to create dialogue with others that served to surface and develop meaning – both in terms of descriptions and attempted explanations of experience and ideas. The results of that dialogue are set out in Chapter 4. However, she also used story writing to create her own, internal dialectic – a dialogue with herself. This dialogue took place within the pages of her journal, but finally had its most sustained manifestation in the writing of the thesis itself – nearly every sentence of which caused the writer to reflect on what was being written, as well as making her aware of – and even more determined to use – the power of expression in the terms that Reason and Hawkins (1988) described.

But is it research?

However, the question is whether, without the external dialectic this kind of expressive and reflective writing still counts as "research activity". In other words, does it "count" as a research tool if it was produced without having been read out loud to others and without having become the source of the kind of dialogue with others described – and so valued – by Reason and Hawkins (1988)? This might seem like a fine point – why be so concerned about whether this kind of writing "counts"? This writer believes that it is an important issue, even in the context of action research which requires the researcher to balance action and private reflection with collective inquiry. To devalue the enormous amount of private or internal dialogue that accompanies interactive research of any kind, and which is certainly involved in the

production of a thesis, is to discount data that is potentially very valuable.

In her own case, as already mentioned, she had, over five years, produced literally thousands of journal entries, notes on the margins of articles and papers, workshop outlines, exercises to facilitate action and learning on the part of clients and students, lecture notes and handout materials. In Reason and Hawkins' terms, they were very powerful forms of expression – of story writing. Between them, they told the story of the interaction between the external data (the writer's professional and life experience) and the internal data (the frameworks – ultimately to be thought of as an evolving praxis – which guided her behaviour, her instinctive ways of doing things and her emotional as well as intellectual reactions).

Action research coupled with action learning were certainly generating a powerful process of data generation, collection and analysis. The keeping of notes particularly in the form of a learning journal (Boud, 1985) was providing a way to capture that process as it happened, day-by-day. But something else was needed for the story to be told coherently, as an integrated account of a complex series of experiences and reflections. In using exactly those words in conversation with a colleague one day, an answer was offered: tell it as a story, but tell it as a particular story – yours, your "autobiography". And use the autobiographical method not just as a vehicle for *reporting* the data, but as an integral part of the methodology used to *generate* and analyse it.

On closer study, it seemed to this writer that autobiography, like biography, has primarily attracted the attention of sociologists as a method of research. Autobiography is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "writing the story of one's own life." With some notable exceptions including Gordon Allport's (1942) *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*, it's this writer's observation that psychologists as a professional group have not systematically recognised the

production and reading of autobiographies – or biographies – as a means of expanding the knowledge base of their discipline.

By contrast, Bertaux (1981) writing from a sociological perspective in *Biography and Society* has suggested that biography – and autobiography – offer a powerful means of transforming sociological practice. He and the others who have contributed to this volume offer many perspectives and frameworks for analysing and interpreting the content of biographical and autobiographical material.

Bertaux notes that autobiography is relevant as a source of data not only when we read the autobiography of others, but when we write our own. In encouraging the use of story-telling – including the telling of one's own story – he is seeing it as a method of extending the wisdom and praxis of sociologists.

He notes that:

> narration need not be atheoretical, but it forces the theoretician to theorise *about something concrete* (his italics). If its form is simple, it can be used to convey highly complex contents... ...as it forces us to transcend that analytic stage, at which we stop too often, and to move towards synthesis (Bertaux, 1981, p44).

This was the use made of autobiography – or story writing – by this researcher. The act of writing – as much as the telling of the story to other people – became increasingly a means of generating data, and making sense of and synthesising it as well as simply reporting it.

In this way the keeping of the journal and other notes, and the production of the thesis itself became research tools. In *The Way of The Thesis*, Turner (1989) compares thesis writing to a craft, involving the skilled application of tools to both *creating* and *uncovering* the subject matter. Through the application of craft skills, the thesis writer searches out, constructs and sustains a good argument or contention (a thesis). The

argument is carried on with oneself and with others, through the process of construction and search, "when you have brought understanding to the reader, you begin to grow wisdom for yourself" (Turner, 1989, p35).

The use of *journal writing* as a means of not only recording experience but making sense of it in various ways has a long and multi-cultural history (Rainer, 1980). Rainer believes that the first diaries that were not essentially historical records were written by Japanese women in the tenth century. Their diaries were used to explore subjective fantasises and dreams, not just external events. Carl Jung (1875–1961) used the keeping of a diary to develop much of his psychological theory – including his theory of collective unconscious, recording his dreams and fantasies of recurring images and symbols.

In using a journal or diary in this way, the keeper of the journal is not simply collecting field notes. Both Rainer (1980) and psychologist Ira Progoff (1975) have written detailed accounts of the journal techniques which can be used to facilitate the development of understanding and changed behaviour. Progoff's *Intensive Journal Method* is a very systematic approach through which one maintains "a continuing confrontation with oneself in the midst of life," as a "psychological laboratory" in which personal growth is recorded and studied to bring the outer and inner parts of one's experience into harmony.

Anais Nin (1903–1977) not only published her own diaries (1966–1976) but collaborated with Tristine Rainer for some years in teaching journal workshops. Their approach suggests four basic uses of the diary: as a means of *catharsis* (the release or expression of feelings and the accessing of emotion); as a means of *description* and recollection (probably the most common form of diary expression, capturing and recording reality – or at least the way we experience it, through our senses); as a means of accessing the imagination, through *free, intuitive writing* (Rainer believes that this

can also be a means of getting in touch with personal creativity and the unconscious mind, by removing or putting aside the control of the conscious mind); and, as a means of *reflection,* in which the intellect contemplates experience and develops ideas, solves problems and at times integrates catharsis, description and intuition. In this way, the diary is used to access four aspects of the person – that which comes from the heart, the senses, the imagination and the head (Rainer, 1980).

The use of diary or journal techniques as a means of facilitating management development has also been developed and propounded in more recent times (see, for example, Boud, 1985).

There is, of course, a difference between keeping a journal and writing a thesis. Both require the integration of separate and diverse experiences and ideas into one coherent account, or in the case of a thesis – a sustained argument. But the methods of writing described above give some idea of how the process of writing extends well beyond the recording of experience to include an active role in double-loop learning.

To re-emphasise Turner's point however, the telling of a *whole story* – through the mechanism of writing a thesis – is different from the cathartic, descriptive, intuitive and reflective purposes which might be served by writing about isolated and separate incidents. The need to make connections between many different sets of ideas, to tie the story back to an essential thread of argument or contention and to make sense of a broad range of experiences over a long period of time, offers the potential for a deeper, richer and more sustained insight for both the writer and the reader.

The writer should make it clear at this point that she did not regard the production of a thesis as being literally the same thing as writing one's life history. But she did come to see the thesis as providing, amongst other things, an opportunity to use personal story writing – of the kind contained in Chapter 4 – as a research activity that could –

and did – generate personal meaning.

Having become convinced that it did, the question remains whether it should be taken seriously as an activity for generating collective knowledge. In other words, does it create meaning and knowledge that is of use to others? This assumes that in writing the story itself (not just in her activities in the field) the writer is capable of maintaining "critical subjectivity" of the kind so extensively explored in this chapter. Hankiss (1981) *On the Mythological Rearranging of One's Life History* has observed that:

> Everyone builds his or her own theory about the history and the course of his or her life by attempting to classify his or her particular successes and fortunes, gifts and choices, favourable and unfavourable elements of his or her fate according to a coherent, explanatory principle and to incorporate them within a *historical unit*. In other words, everybody tries, in one way or another, to build up his or her ontology.
>
> *Specific mechanisms* are involved in this building process. Human memory selects, emphasises, rearranges and gives new colour to everything that happened in reality; and, more important, it endows certain fundamental episodes with a symbolic meaning, often to the point of turning them almost into myths, by locating them at a focal point of the explanatory system of the self. It is through this system that what a person has to say about himself is expressed in a particular way, for instance by telling stories having others than himself as protagonists: one finds out about people through the way in which they talk about others.
>
> This *mythological rearranging* plays a specific *instrumental* role within the self-regulating system of the psyche which allows the subject to smoothly incorporate his past and his own life-history into the strategy, or "script" of his present life (Hankiss, 1981, pp203–204).

In other words, the writer might engage in a kind of personal myth-making, as opposed to the collective myth-making described by Reason and Hawkins (1988).

Without the exercise of critical subjectivity, the sort of integrated story telling contained in Chapter 4 cannot be regarded as research activity in and of itself – although it might become the object of someone else's research activity in the same

way that Ferrarotti (1981) suggests that the study of other people's biographies and autobiographies is a legitimate way of studying the larger phenomenon of an organisation or society. It becomes, to borrow again the words used earlier, simply another story – possibly a good one, but not one that creates directly transferable meaning and knowledge that is of value to others. If they try to apply the personal meaning constructed by the writer, there is a chance that they are applying someone else's myths to their own reality.

In practice, this writer could think of no other way to integrate the complex and large body of experience – comprising action, feeling and thought over five years, some of it generated by others and shared with the researcher, some of it generated by the researcher alone and shared with others, and some of it generated in company with others. In telling the story, she takes care to describe how she attempted to maintain critical subjectivity during the research activity itself – and also indicates the times when this was completely missing. She describes how she tested her conclusions, and developed her theory; how she modified her constructs in the light of her experience. In writing the story, she has attempted to be both close and distant, to adopt the perspective of "meta-me". If she has constructed a myth or fantasy, she at least has aimed to write about it in such a way as to make the entry into mythology as visible as possible, both to herself and others. Story telling, when coupled with action research, at least produces a story that no longer represents one person's unchallenged view of the world, but exposes the means by which that view was acquired. The individual's "third position thinking" is on full display and can be readily critiqued by people other than themselves.

The value of the individual case-study

Of course, action research – whether exploring an intervention by a group of people in one organisation, or exploring one person's interventions in dozens of organisations –

still carries the limitations of all case-study research, that it produces purely "local" knowledge, even if that local knowledge is internally valid.

Gummeson (1991) gives a helpful summary of the ways in which case-studies can be of use. He notes that case-studies can be used in several different ways. The first way is to attempt to derive general conclusions from a limited number of cases (it serves the purpose of efficiency). A second way is to arrive at specific conclusions which are particular to this one case because this one case is for some reason important (it might represent a "land mark" as in case-law). Individual cases can also be used to generate change – to "show case" or "sell" an idea that would otherwise not be acted upon by others. He then provides an excellent summary of the argument for and against it as a research methodology. Most of the arguments against it are raised when it is used to derive general conclusions from a limited number of cases, on the grounds that it lacks statistical validity and is hard to replicate (the test for reliability). He suggests, as do Susman and Everard (1978) who were cited so much earlier in this chapter, that in practice, the most important advantage of case-study research is the opportunity it provides for holism – that is, to enable us to study many different aspects of the phenomenon, to study those aspects in relation to each other and to view the phenomenon within its total environment (Gummeson, 1991).

This writer would contend that a story based on action research has another and even more important value. If it is done well, it can provide a template against which the reader can review his or her own experiences – and thus becomes a trigger for third position thinking in others. If this kind of personal review and reflection were happening face-to-face, that would be called "immediacy" (Carkuff, 1969). When it happens through the pages of a book, we might call it something else but it can sometimes have something of the same power. Most of us have had the experience at some time of being challenged and stimulated to think about our own lives when reading an account of someone else's. To be stimulated by an account of someone else's

thinking process is perhaps more unusual, but hopefully possible.

The value of this project – and of this story – should then be assessed in terms of the thinking that it stimulated in others, rather than whether it is representative of the experiences of others. In other words, examining this sea-shell (the story of how praxis was created and discovered) might not enable you to reliably infer anything about the construction of the universe, but if in examining this one sea-shell the reader becomes interested in exploring his or her own story and praxis then it has served a practical purpose, and possibly made the most enduring kind of contribution – both to the craft of management development and to the continuing effort to understand it more completely.

Capturing the data of experience

This chapter has reviewed in some depth some of the key research issues which confront all action researchers, and some which were particularly important given the subject of this research, with its focus on reflective techniques as tools for learning and research.

As indicated, this writer's research methodologies incorporated all five of Cunningham's (1988) methods for conducting "wholistic interactive research: collaborative research, dialogic research, experiential research, action research and contextual locating, plus the use of narrative.

It remains now to summarise the particular types of data which were both "created" and "found" during the course of the study and the use made of them. (The reader might recall that the last of Blaikie's questions identified right at the beginning of this chapter were: "How do I collect data?" and "How do I make sense of it when I've collected it?")

Action researchers have access to all the known methods used by social scientists, managers and other practitioners to generate and analyse data, ranging from "traditional" approaches such as survey methods, interviews and case-studies through to co-operative inquiry (Reason, 1988) and the production of narrative (Yin, 1987).

As mentioned already this researcher had access to a huge amount of data during the course of the study. Specifically, she was able to tap into:

- what others had to say about their personal experience as adult learners or as facilitators of learning;

- what others said or wrote about what they believe or think in relation to adult learning generally;

- her own observation of what others do when learning or assisting others to learn;

- her own experience as a learner and facilitator of learning.

The approach taken to capture data contained elements that were both planned and unplanned. Both components were initially "driven" by the central research question set out at the beginning of Chapter 1:

- How can adults – and particularly managers – be effectively helped when they consider changing their behaviour and attempting to do things in new or modified ways?

To address them, the researcher planned and carried out the following interventions:

- a series of interviews with individual managers who had reported the achievement of significant behavioural change;

- a series of co-operative practice sessions and inquiry with academic and private practitioners in the field of management development;

- review of the literature relating to the management of behavioural change in adults, particularly in the contexts of organisational life and management roles.

These interventions were "planned" in the sense that at the beginning of the project, the researcher had decided that these particular events "needed" to happen, at some point in time. Carr and Kemmis (1986) would call this a "defined cycle" of research. By contrast, as is the nature of much action research, a great many things happened during the project which could not be planned in the same way. The researcher knew that she would have a great many conversations and experiences with both clients, students and colleagues over the course of the project which would be relevant but which could not be predicted in advance or "made to happen" in quite the same way. Much of the data was generated spontaneously and was accessed in an opportunistic fashion, "seizing the moments" as they presented themselves. The extent of this data has already been described and the major part of this chapter has tried to capture the action reflection techniques used in observing and participating, recording and reflecting upon that experience, experimenting with and refining the interventions made, and subjecting the results to continuing cycles of observation and analysis, involving both self and others.

Interviews with managers

An interview is defined here as a structured conversation, in which specific questions are asked and the answers recorded, in whole or in part, manually or electronically.

Certainly, finding managers to speak to was not particularly difficult. The researcher wanted to spend two hours interviewing each of six managers who had impressed others with whom they worked as having achieved noticeable and significant change in some aspect of their management behaviour – change that was not "hearsay" but had actually been observed by others.

It should be pointed out that at this early stage of the research activity, the researcher had not focussed her inquiry as directly on the place that reflection has to play in learning and behavioural change as she came to do subsequently. Nor was she concerned with achieving a representative sample. She sought these people out as a reaction to having difficulty in working with a particular client group. The question was asked almost in a spirit of frustration – "What *does* it take to get you guys to change?" As a result she looked for the managers in particular places – three large organisations (containing more than 1000 people) which were different in terms of industry and culture. What they had in common was that they were current clients of the researcher and had provided her with significant challenges in her professional practice.

Six managers were found (two in each organisation) by asking three senior executives in each organisation to think of people who fitted the criteria described earlier. Senior executives had been approached, rather than human resources specialists because the latter were considered to be less likely to see people in action on the job. In each case, a surprisingly small number of names was given (surprising to the researcher, who had expected that in large organisations there would be many examples).

In any event, despite the fact that the researcher went to some trouble to locate and interview these managers, the data so generated has not been included in the main body of the experiences described in Chapter 4, for reasons that will now be explained.

When the researcher contacted the managers, she described the nature of the research project and said that she wanted to talk to them about the ways in which they had tackled their own development as managers. The specific questions were not given in advance, because the researcher wanted spontaneous answers to questions rather than prepared ones. Her perception was that the questions would need elaboration (perhaps through examples) in order to make clear sense to the people being interviewed. She was also interested to explore the sorts of elaboration that might be needed – and preferred to do that face-to-face when the questions were first put. This would have been impossible to do if the questions had been sent to the managers in advance.

When the researcher subsequently met with the managers individually, the attempt to conduct a "systematic" interview by working through each of the questions and allocating a predetermined proportion of time to each one was quickly abandoned. The researcher would prefer to call these "conversations" rather than interviews, since about the only thing that the researcher "managed" throughout the meetings was the time, place and the focussing of the discussion on the subject of attempting change in one's behaviour as a manager. The way in which the topic was handled varied considerably across all six conversations.

It should also be reported that the conversations were both stimulating (all lasted for at least two hours) and very difficult. All the managers had to think about the questions and all seemed to struggle in some way to articulate answers.

There were three basic trigger questions:

- what sort of things have triggered significant learning for you? (learning was defined as a shift in practice, not just in understanding);

- would you mind describing the learning and why it was important to you?;

- what sorts of things do you think trigger learning for senior managers generally? What does it take for them to learn?

The managers spoke about the sorts of events (in both their professional and private lives) that had triggered learning. They all – without exception – described the sort of things which Mumford (1980), Snell (1988) and McCall et al (1988) would describe as coming from challenging and difficult experiences in the "school of hard knocks". These had the effect of depressing this researcher/practitioner considerably: if that's what triggers learning, how can a management educator stand a chance, short of engineering major catastrophes in the lives of her clients and students?

As the action research process went on, the researcher started to see these interviews as being important, not for the data they generated directly, but for the thinking they generated for the researcher. To the question: "What can *I* do that will make a difference?" gradually emerged a different kind of answer, that was about readiness for learning not only being a response to significant life events, but also a state of being that can be profoundly influenced by the way the person understands and uses their learning skills.

The outcome was that these interviews provided a powerful incentive for the researcher to persist in developing her practice and efforts at learning to learn – if for no other reason than that she didn't fancy her chances of always being lucky enough to work with managers who had just undergone a significant professional or life experience. Only a passing reference is made to these interviews in Chapter 4, but these comments will hopefully have put them in context.

<u>Practice and inquiry sessions with colleagues</u>

The researcher also wanted to work with colleagues in exploring their own ideas and practices in the field of management development – not simply to gain their views, but

to work actively together in developing answers.

Finding colleagues to work with in this way proved to be much more difficult than finding the managers had been. The researcher's immediate collegiate group at the RMIT, within the then Department of Administrative Studies, was the initial focus of her interest. She was keen to invite them to be involved and approached them with enthusiasm, expecting that they would be interested in the subject matter – as it affected their own professional practice.

The reaction from the five people approached was a surprise. All were courteous, wished the researcher well with the assignment, but declined to participate. This was very unexpected and the researcher's private reactions certainly couldn't be described as objective and scholarly. It had seemed to her such an "inherently good idea" – to explore one's strategies for assisting people to develop and one's reasons for using them. These were all capable people whose work was admired and respected by the researcher – indeed, as described in Chapter 4 – her own efforts had been largely modelled on their example. As a group, they had in the past been very generous in directing the researcher to literature and outlining the processes used in the courses they conducted at the RMIT.

Why were they now so reluctant to participate in the process? There had been several reasons given – it would take time that they didn't have right now (one person); it wasn't a very good idea for a colleague "to do research" on or with another colleague (one person). Two people were "still doing a lot of thinking" about their courses and their approach; and one person answered the question by avoiding it – simply continually postponing the time for further discussion of the issue.

It was interesting to ponder on what had prompted these reactions – first to individual conversations and then to a group discussion. The researcher's first assumption was that it was something to do with her own behaviour – that the invitations had been offered in

a way that was inappropriate, that inadvertently she had offended in some way, or that the people didn't like or trust her sufficiently to want to work with her in this way.

After letting some time elapse (about 6 weeks) she asked the individuals whether any of these things was an issue. The responses from two were that the topic was a difficult one and that the researcher should "come back in a couple of years when I've sorted things out." Two suggested that there were differences in the group around methodologies anyway and that it was a time for the group to consolidate and not run the risk of "splitting apart again." The other person said that they thought the issue was not an appropriate one to research in a collegiate group, and should be conducted with people who were not known to the researcher.

This entire episode forced the researcher to "rethink" a major part of her methodology. Her judgement was that to try and force the issue by "talking people into it" would be both intrusive and unproductive. Instead, she decided to let the matter drop for the time being.

In the following months and years (in fact, up to the time of writing) the researcher was working with three of the five individuals in designing and delivering development interventions – whether in the context of RMIT's courses or in consultancy practice. Encounters and discussions with these two were the subject of diary work and reflection in the same way as any others. However, when the time came to write about the experience – to put them in context in this "autobiography" – the writer (not the researcher) found it helpful to pull together the ongoing experience of working and talking with each one, and to give a clear and focussed account of the data as it related to each. The result is a series of individual stories about working with each of these individuals. The series also includes the experience of working with one consultant who was in private practice and at no time met or had anything to do with the RMIT group.

Working with clients and students

"Unplanned" interventions offer particular challenges to the action researcher – some to do with the mechanics of data capture and analysis and some to do with the ethics of participant observation.

For most of the situations in which data were generated and collected in this study, the use of electronic aids was not feasible or appropriate – given that much of the action took place in classes or in consulting situations.

The researcher had to rely on field notes – usually made in rough form during individual and group discussions, during breaks in sessions and at the end of the day's work. These rough notes became the basis of a journal which was used not only to record what had been said or what had happened, but to continue the process of reflection and analysis which had already begun with the initial note-taking.

The researcher also maintained extensive client files as a normal part of her consultancy practice. These files contain background material, briefing notes and any documentation generated or obtained during the life of the consultancy. However, a section of each file consists of a systematic case review, organised around the following headings:

- the *stated* aims of the consultancy;
- the actual outcomes and impacts;
- the action taken;

- what was learned from the consultancy;

- what would be done differently "next time".

The files remained an important means of data capture and processing during the life of the project.

It is important to acknowledge again that analysis of the data was actually happening as the data was being created. In a class of Master's candidates or in a consultancy exercise, the task as construed by this writer is generally not to pass on information and ideas, but to create them in partnership with others.

Since the Master of Business in Management/Organisation Change and Development is itself based on action learning methods, a major agenda is actively reviewing the processes through which candidates learn, solve problems and effectively intervene in organisational settings. Their experience in doing these things is the subject of discussion and analysis, and the constructs for describing and explaining those experiences are themselves created by the participants.

Usually the researcher's role would be to offer a process for "managing" the discussion, but the use of the processes and certainly the content and outcome of the discussions themselves were most frequently in the hands of the participants. This way of working with people was – and is – also fundamental to her consultancy practice, which is much less about training, teaching or advising than it is about creating situations in which individuals and groups can explore and solve their own problems, or meet their own challenges.

Working in this way, the data were simultaneously "generated", "collected" and "analysed". Mostly the conclusions were reached and insights gained in partnership

with others, either working one-to-one, in small groups (of between thee and ten people), or in large groups (generally numbering between twenty and fifty people, but occasionally reaching as many as two hundred).

Casual conversations, as well as the kind of professional dialogue which Jones (1985) calls "talk", sitting listening to others or reading the words of others – these were all forms of dialogue which stimulate the reflective thinking process.

The work done privately was that of systematically summarising the insights and experiences gained in dialogue with others, and of creating more and more concise summaries of those things.

This chapter has already described in some detail the methods used in this research project to capture the action research data and to ensure its systematic processing. They consisted chiefly of research cycling on a monthly – and at times a weekly – basis, critical incident analysis, co-operative collegiate inquiry and non-defensive reflection. These strategies were used to inject as much internal validity as possible into the process of data capture and reflection.

To assess the external validity of the experiences reported here, the researcher has used contextual locating and triangulation.
For ease of presentation, the data relating to clients and students have been presented in Chapter 4 as a series of vignettes – some involving quite long contacts (over two or more years) and others of much shorter duration. These have been woven into an "incident history" or narrative which maps the development of both the researcher's praxis and the development of her personal "theory".

This narrative also describes the process through which the broad research issues which triggered the project were progressively refined and focussed to those set out in Chapter

1, namely:

- how does reflection help us to develop our understanding of ourselves in ways that help us to learn?

- what practical reflective techniques work?

- how do our tacit or implicit "theories" about ourselves guide our behaviour, and does it help to make implicit theories (Argyris & Schon, 1978) explicit?

- how can the practitioner – the educator or facilitator of learning in others – use reflection to understand and develop his or her own practice, with its suite of acknowledged and unacknowledged "theories", and to effectively integrate those theories with practice?

- and how does the researcher tap into, make use of, test and perhaps refine the stock of existing theory and knowledge?

<u>An endnote: An ethical issue in data capture in action research</u>

This researcher did not set out deliberately to explore and expound on the ethical issues involved in action research, but believes that it is an important obligation to surface any ethical issues or dilemmas encountered during the research process. In this case, she encountered a recurring challenge as a participant-observer who has unplanned and spontaneous opportunities to create and reflect on the experience of herself and others, and herself in dialogue and action with others.

The dilemma in many situations is one of declaration of one's interest and intentions around research, as compared with learning. As life-long learners, it can be argued that

all adults have the opportunity – even the responsibility – to learn from most of life's experiences. As learners, even when learning is very focussed and driven by particular areas of concern or interest – as in the case of the practitioner deliberately developing their professional praxis – it is not usually the case that we announce our intentions to learn something or our experience of having learned something, although from time to time we might do both of these things.

In action learning, however, where at least some of the learning takes place in company with other "declared" learners, these announcements are often a necessary part of the process. We say to each other: "This is what I'm keen to learn to do differently or better, and I would appreciate your assistance and support during that process." In this way a "deal" or learning contract is made with ourselves and others. This writer – as learner – made many such "deals" during the course of this project, deals about what might be learned with and through other people.

In the role of researcher, however, where experiences with others will potentially be written down in a public document, there is an important addition to be made to the deal. The researcher needs to signal the research intentions and establish ground rules about issues of confidentiality in reporting. That was a relatively straightforward process to manage, in the experience of this researcher.

What she experienced as more difficult, were the times when profound – sometimes painful – learning took place in unplanned, "unsolicited" dialogue with others, where she had not held up a cue card in advance reading "anything you say or demonstrate to me may be written down in my thesis." The point here is that once an experience has shaped either practice (what the practitioner does) or theory (the way the practitioner thinks) it cannot be "unlearned" or discarded. It can't be "bracketed out" of the equation. Sometimes it is possible – and important – to acknowledge to others that "unplanned" learning is taking place, or has taken place, and to check the other person's

experience of the event(s). At other times, it may not be possible or appropriate, given the circumstances and timing of the dialogue and the nature of the relationship with others involved.

This researcher has reported these learnings in ways that protect the identity of those involved but needs to acknowledge the large quantities of experience – or data – which were handed to her by others without their awareness or consent.

Chapter 3: Reflection as a technique for individual and organisational learning and change

The previous chapter attempted to define reflection and describe the way it contributes in the context of action learning and action research.

Smith's (1992, p29) definition of reflection was offered:

> the processing of data to create or modify meaning schemas... Meaning schemas are learned cognitive structures by which we give order or meaning to events which impinge on us. They determine the way the individual views and orders his or her world. Since meaning schemas are learned, they are neither static nor universal, and are subject to continuing confirmation or negation.

"Higher-order" reflection, from the "third position" was also described – a position from which one "thinks about one's own thinking", and engages in "double-loop learning" (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

This chapter attempts to put the capacity for reflection – both for organisations and individuals – into the context of contemporary organisational life. It is argued that it has significant value as a tool for assisting organisations as collective entities and individual human beings to learn and develop in productive ways in the face of discontinuity and complex change as we approach the new millennium (just six years away at the time of writing!). The concept of organisational and personal "re-invention" (Goss et al, 1993) is explored as a key capability at this time in our history.

Having made a case for its importance as a capability, the chapter examines some of the challenges which face individuals – including managers and consultants – who attempt to use reflection as a way of significantly and usefully enhancing their own and their organisation's ways of dealing with and managing change.

Finally, the chapter explores concepts and techniques from the organisational

management learning literature which have been developed to assist individuals and organisations to enhance their reflective capacity, with a particular focus on "double-loop" learning and reflection (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

Since reflection is only one – although this writer would argue a key one – of the many tools that are available to facilitate the process of learning, along the way this chapter attempts to put action learning into context by relating it to the seminal work of Knowles (1984) and Revans (1982) in the field of adult learning.

A brief summary of the major insights gained by this writer from the literature is set out right at the end of the chapter.

The age of discontinuity and information

Peter Drucker (1969) in *The Age of Discontinuity* argued that the world was entering a phase of discontinuity – a period in which change would be continuous, often fast, and involving transformative not just incremental shifts in technology, organisational practice and in many aspects of society as a whole. Similarly Tofler (1981) saw the world as experiencing a new wave of development that was not simply a continuation of what had been in the past.

Naisbitt (1982) diagnosed ten "megatrends" or "major transformations" taking place in society; while Hickman and Silva (1988) described "eight dimensions of the corporate future":

- globalisation of markets, capital and production cycles;

- collaboration and strategic alliances between former competitors;

- new approaches to attracting capital;
- new alliances between the public and private sectors;
- new forms of organisation;
- social responsibility and ethics;
- integrating subcultures;
- individual fulfilment.

Driving these organisational responses is what Freed (1992) has aptly called "relentless innovation": humankind's capacity to invent – and effectively implement – new ideas and possibilities affecting almost every facet of human life and behaviour. This capacity for innovation is "relentless" in the sense that no society or political regime can successfully stifle it; it is increasingly global enterprise or community which owns and spreads the fruits of innovation; and technology itself is now harnessed for the process of invention and implementation – most spectacularly in the use of computers to "invent" computers.

The result, Freed notes, is a global age characterised by generic uncertainty and deep instability, in which the critical commodity is knowledge; the critical skill is creating, identifying and applying the right knowledge; and competitive advantage rests almost solely on the ability to learn, and to act on the learning.

This is the so-called "post-industrial age", the age of information and information technology, characterised by interactive multi-media; global knowledge networks and information "super-highways"; and a rate of innovation which means that most of the

knowledge which will be in use in organisations in the first decade of the millennium has not yet been invented (Lepani, 1994).

There are already glimpses of the next age, shaped by the emerging convergence between biotechnology, information technology and the power of miniaturisation to produce molecular computers – the age of "nanotechnology", and its accompanying "mindware", which envisages new ways of working with the human mind to meet the challenges of the pace and scope of change unleashed by information and technology and nanotechnology. (See, for example, Varela, 1991.) Lansbury (1992, p6) puts all this into an historical perspective:

> Living as we do at the end of the twentieth century, we are experiencing an explosion of knowledge and change which has been unequalled in the history of human civilisation. To illustrate this fact, it has been estimated that if the total experience of the human species was divided into 800 lifetimes, it is only in the last six that it has been possible to measure time with any precision, only in the last two that anyone has used an electric motor, and the overwhelming majority of material goods that we use in our daily lives have been developed in this, our 800th life time.

It was Igor Ansoff (1988), one of the most influential thinkers and writers in the field of strategic management, who perhaps most clearly alerted the Western world to the fact that discontinuity requires organisation strategies and forms which can cope not so much with an extraordinary degree of change but a different kind of change. An organisation is facing discontinuous change when its past does not prepare it for the future:

> One test of the degree of discontinuity is the extent to which the firm makes a departure from the market needs it knows how to serve, from the technology on which the firm's products are based, or from the geographical, economic, cultural, social, or political settings in which it knows how to do business (Ansoff, 1988, p92).

Ansoff saw the need not only for new organisational structures and cultures, but for new managerial "mindsets". As Table 1 indicates, Ansoff saw older, serial, continuous

change as producing "competitive" organisation cultures responsive to customers and intent on gaining market share. Random, episodic, discontinuous change, on the other hand, requires an entrepreneurial culture.

Table 1: Competitive vs Entrepreneurial Cultures

Competitive	Entrepreneurial
CHANGE serial incremental continual	CHANGE random episodic discontinuous
GOAL DRIVEN optimise profitability	OPPORTUNITY DRIVEN optimise potential
WORLD VIEW intra-firm intra-national	WORLD VIEW multi-industry multi-national
VALUES economic rewards power conformity stability	VALUES economic rewards personal fulfilment deviance change
SKILLS participative goal-setting extrapolative planning	SKILLS charismatic vision-creating creative planning novel problem-solving

(From Limerick, 1992, p41)

Kanter (1989, p20) also was one of the first to argue that organisations need ways to achieve "... faster action, more creative manoeuvring, more flexibility, and closer partnerships with employees and customers ... more agile, limber management that pursues opportunity without being bogged down by cumbersome structures or weighty procedures that impede action."

At a national level, Australia, in common with most advanced industrial societies has seen major restructuring and reform at both macro-economic and micro-economic (workplace) levels. (See, for example, Dunphy, 1990.) Lansbury (1992) describes some of the major organisational impacts in these terms:

- the replacement of traditional economies of scale with economies of scope (meaning that the highly programmable nature of new technology allows a single facility to produce greater variety without significant increase in cost); this means that the workforce must be able to be quickly and inexpensively re-deployed to produce a different product if the market changes, which in turn requires a more flexible and multi-skilled workforce and more adaptive form of organisation;

- the development of technologies which often require major changes in work rules and organisation; as well as needing to learn new skills, flatter organisational hierarchies mean workers are required to be more "self-managing";

- as simple tasks are taken over by machines, the remaining work is increasingly complex and requires a high level of interdependence among employees; teams or project groups are often formed to undertake specific assignments, then disbanded; since these teams may cut across established lines of authority and demarcation, new forms of work organisation are required, such as matrix and network systems, in which the hierarchies and power relations are no longer so clearly defined; in these contexts, retraining and re-learning becomes an integral part of the job;

- similarly, Limerick (1992) describes "network organisations" which have the capacity to build and use internal and external (including, where necessary,

> global) relationships which are fluid, less hierarchical and which rely on information technology rather than cumbersome management control systems for their effectiveness and responsiveness.

The learning organisation and its implications for reflective capability

In all that has been outlined so far in this chapter, a recurring theme is apparent: the importance of knowledge and learning capability as a key organisational and individual response to the requirements of a world driven by discontinuity, innovation, information and knowledge.

> In an economy where the only certainty is uncertainty, the one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge. When markets shift, technologies proliferate, competitors multiply, and products become obsolete almost overnight, successful companies are those that consistently create new knowledge, disseminate it widely through the organisation, and quickly embody it in new technologies and products. These activities define the "knowledge-creating" company, whose sole business is continuous innovation (Nonaka, 1991, p96).

For this writer, the implication to be drawn is that the kind of learning and knowledge creation that requires fundamental shifts in mindsets, that is continual and which requires a constant questioning not only of how to do things, but what needs to be done, requires, of necessity, a capacity for reflection that includes reflection upon the self – the third position entailed in "double-loop learning" (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Indeed, Ansoff's (1988) definition of discontinuity – a state where the past does not prepare one for the future – would seem to make double-loop learning a necessity for organisational survival.

The self that is the object of reflection might be an organisation, a team or an individual, but in each case, the requirement seems to be that nothing be taken for granted, that the actors themselves, and their way of doing business, are as much caught up in the business of change as the services, products and environments on and in which they operate.

It is in this vein that McGill et al (1992) write about the need for organisations to re-invent themselves through the process of generative learning and transformative change (which they directly equate with double-loop learning).

> "Generative" learning emphasises continuous experimentation and feedback in an ongoing examination of the very way organisations go about defining and solving problems. Managers in the companies demonstrate behaviours of openness, systemic thinking, creativity, self-efficacy and empathy. By contrast, adaptive or single-loop learning focuses on solving problems in the present without examining the appropriateness of current learning behaviours (McGill et al, 1992, p5).

Similarly, Goss et al (1993) write about companies whose need and skill is not simply to improve themselves but to re-invent themselves, to create a powerful new vision and then to manage the present from the future, to use the new vision to create a new self or *being*.

> ... we Westerners have few mental hooks or even words for excursions into being. They call it *kokoro* (Nonaka, 1991). In contrast, Westerners typically assess their progression through adulthood in terms of personal wealth or levels of accomplishments. To the Japanese, merely *doing* these things is meaningless unless one is able to become deeper and wiser along the way (Goss et al, 1993, p101).

This writer was interested to explore what the literature has to say about how these processes of generative learning and re-invention can be made to happen. Certainly, the capacity of organisations to engage in collective learning – either right across the organisation entity or in substantial bits of it – has been the subject of a "substantial and rapidly growing body of rhetoric" (Sharratt & Field, 1993, p129).

It is the writer's impression that while much of the literature uses the term organisational learning, and suggests the things that organisations need to do in order to be better at collective learning, inevitably – since the organisations are composed of individuals – much of what is discussed concerns the ways in which individuals behave.

Very little of the literature on organisational learning attempts to tightly define – or even define at all – any differences between organisational and individual learning. There is, of course, a body of literature devoted to the concepts and practice of adult learning, which was established well before the current spate of literature on organisation learning. This writer begins the chapter with a brief review of the more recent literature focussed on organisational learning, noting the implications that has for individuals; then as the chapter proceeds, focuses more specifically on what the literature – including some of the counselling and adult learning literature – has to suggest in the way of techniques that help to develop the reflective capability of individuals. The concepts of organisational learning, learning organisations and learning environments have been pursued by, among many others, Morgan (1986, 1988), Garratt (1990), Senge (1990), Pedler et al (1991), Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) and Sofo (1993).

It is interesting to note, in passing, that the word *learn* is derived from Middle Higher German *lesa* meaning "to follow or find the track, to follow, to go after." The Latin *lira* means "the earth thrown up between two furrows" (Klein, 1971). As Percy (1993) observes, the dimensions implied here are those of deepening, pursuing, and churning over.

Some definitions of *organisational learning* include the following:

> Organisational learning means the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).
>
> An entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviours is changed (Huber, 1991).
>
> Organisations are seen as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour (Levitt & March, 1988).

For these writers, organisational learning goes well beyond the notion of structured training and the development of competencies. For them:

> learning is the way in which individuals and groups acquire, interpret, re-organise, change or assimilate clusters of information, skills, values, attitudes and feelings ... (while) the organisational (or workplace) learning environment refers to the learning "climate" in an organisation, and is a key facet of organisational culture. The learning environment is influenced by a combination of aspects of organisational life such as management, decision-making processes, workplace structures, work practices, physical setting and organisational values. These combine to informally, formally and incidentally enhance and encourage individual and organisational learning at all levels (Kempin, 1994, p5).

Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) has been a major stimulant to thinking and practice in the field of organisational and individual learning. Senge identified three skills which he sees as being critical in the age of discontinuity: skill in managing the complexity associated with interdependence and globalism; the creative orientation and mastery needed by organisations and individuals in building, sharing and implementing powerful visions; and skills in reflective conversation and dialogue. More will be said about Senge's work later in this chapter, but publication of his book either triggered – or was closely associated with – a widespread interest in the subject of learning.

Goss et al (1993) offer some very interesting examples of organisations – some of them very large multi-national corporations – who have successfully incorporated into their business planning and practice what can only be described as high order learning strategies, including reflective techniques. Their comments are quoted extensively here because the organisations they examine represent very significant global examples of organisational learning.

These were all organisations which were prepared to break, and re-create, the mould in which they were doing business – if not the mould for the entire operation, at least for the very core parts of it essential to the success of the business mission and strategy.

Goss et al suggest that these companies did a number of things very well (the italics throughout have been inserted by the writer of this thesis to highlight those aspects of the commentary that relate to the *reflective* capacity of the organisation concerned).

- *They were able to assemble a critical mass of key stakeholders.* The authors' comments about this are interesting:

> Leading pilgrims on the journey of re-inventing an organisation should never be left to the top eight or ten executives. It is deceptively easy to generate consensus among this group; they usually are a tight fraternity, *and it is difficult to spark deep self-examination among them*. If there are revelations, they may never extend beyond this circle.
>
> As proven by the experiences of such companies as Ford, British Petroleum, Chase Bank, AT & T, Europcar, Thomas Cook, and Haazen-Dazs, this group must encompass a critical mass of stakeholders – the employees "who really make things happen around here." Some hold sway over key resources. Others are central to informal opinion networks. The group may often include critical but seldom-seen people like key technologies and leading process engineers. The goal is a flywheel effect, where enough key players get involved and enrolled that it creates a momentum to carry the process forward (Goss et al, 1993, p105).

- *They undertook a complete organisational audit*: a thorough ("third position") investigation designed to reveal and confront the company's true competitive position.

> The best approach is through a *diagnosis* that generates a complete picture of how the organisation really works: what *assumptions* are we making about our strategic position and customer needs that may no longer be valid? Which functions are most influential, and will they be as important in the future as they were in the past? What are the key systems that drive the business? What are the core competencies or skills of the enterprise? What are the shared values and idiosyncrasies that comprise the organisation's being? (Goss et al, 1993, p106).

- *They created a sense of urgency, discussing the undiscussable.*

> There is a *code of silence* in most corporations that conceals the full extent of a corporation's competitive weakness. But a threat that everyone perceives and no one talks about is far more debilitating to a

> company than a threat that has been clearly revealed. *Companies, like people, tend to be at least as sick as their secrets* (Goss et al, 1993, p106).

- *They effectively harnessed contention.*

> There is an obscure law of cybernetics – the law of requisite variety – that postulates that any system must encourage and incorporate variety internally if it is to cope with variety externally... Almost all significant norm-breaking opinions or behaviour in social systems are synonymous with conflict. *Paradoxically, most organisations suppress contention*; many managers, among others, cannot stand to be confronted because they assume they should be "in charge". But control kills invention, learning and commitment. Conflict jump-starts the creative process... Contrary to what many Westerners might think about the importance of consensus in Japanese culture, institutionalised conflict is an integral part of Japanese management. At Honda, any employee, however junior, can call for a *waigaya* session. The rules are that people lay their cards on the table and speak directly about problems. Nothing is out of bounds. *Waigaya legitimises tension so that learning can take place. The Japanese have learned to disagree without being disagreeable and to harness conflict in a wide variety of ingenious ways* (Goss et al, 1993, p107).

- *They engineer organisational breakdowns.*

> It's clear that re-invention is a rocky path and that there will be many breakdowns along the way: systems that threaten to fall apart, deadlines that can't be met, schisms that seem impossible to mend. But just as contention in an organisation can be highly productive, *these breakdowns make it possible for organisations to take a hard look at themselves and confront the work of reinvention*. When an organisation sets out to reinvent itself, breakdowns should happen by design rather than accident... The executive teams must identify the core competencies they wish to build, the soft spots in existing capabilities, and the projects that, if undertaken, will build new muscles (Goss et al, 1993, p108).

McGill et al (1993) also offer some striking examples of organisations that seem to have successfully engaged in what the authors describe as generative learning – including Arthur Anderson (USA), Taco Bell, Whirlpool and BP (UK). They, too, offer some conclusions about the management practices that characterise these learning organisations:

> The key ingredient lies in *how* organisations process their managerial experiences. Learning organisations/managers *learn* from their experiences rather than being *bound* by their past experiences. What does it mean to learn from experience? William Tolbert, in *Learning from Experience*, writes "Learning involves becoming aware of the qualities, patterns, and consequences of one's own experience as one experiences it." Drawing upon Tolbert, one can define four different but related levels of organisation experience: (1) the external world – environment, competitors, customers, and the like; (2) the organisation's/manager's own actions – strategy, policies and procedures, management practices and so on; (3) the organisation's/manager's own problem-identification, problem-definition and problem-solving processes – culture, expertise, and functional orientation, for example; and (4) organisational consciousness – the experience of all of the above.

Adaptive organisations experience events *only one level at a time*, and this exclusive focus limits learning to that level... What are the managerial practices found in generative learning organisations?... Management practices encourage, recognise, and reward those managers whose behaviours reflect five dimensions: openness, systemic thinking, creativity, a sense of efficacy and empathy (McGill et al, 1992, p10).

Sharratt and Field's (1993) review of the organisational learning literature notes a number of recurring themes, each of which has some interesting implications for what an organisation's – and an individual's – reflective capabilities need to be. The first theme is the *need for organisations to develop a brain-like culture*. Morgan (1986) contrasts the traditional organisation (where thinking and doing are split, where each section and division is a well-defined subject of the whole, the structure is bureaucratic and processes are algorithmic) with the learning organisation (where each part of the organisation encapsulates the whole, there is an emphasis on holistic thinking and planning, structures tend to be more fluid and interlacing, and processes rely more heavily on intuition and guesstimates when data is unavailable). This suggests that reflection needs to be a process that brings thinking and action close together (both in time and space), that it is something which transcends organisational structures, and that it incorporates holistic and intuitive thinking as well as fact-based logic.

A second theme is the *need for learning to take place at all levels of the organisation as a whole*. From this perspective, organisational learning cannot be treated as a discrete event or technique like structured training sessions, involving discrete groups of individuals from particular levels or sections of the organisation. Reflection emerges as a collective, social act which brings together people from all levels and functions.

A third theme is the *importance of the organisation's absorptive capacity* (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990): the capacity of an organisation to process and exploit valuable information without getting overwhelmed. While this concept includes relatively straightforward ideas such as the extent to which managers know their market, it generally includes mechanisms and responsive patterns which go beyond the capacity of any one category or employee to implement. It suggests that sense-making involves inter-disciplinary or cross-functional effort in which information and ideas are regularly shared, distilled and collectively brought to bear on complex or important organisational issues.

A fourth theme is the *importance of recognising the learning potential of planning*. Mintzberg's (1987) description of the crafting of corporate strategy cited earlier in this thesis, balances the notions of *deliberate* (planned) strategy with *emergent* (flexible) strategy; balances the time of "quantum leaps" with periods of consolidation; balances cycles of convergence and divergence; balances thinking and action. For Mintzberg, the learning organisation is one in which planning enables the organisation to transform its understanding of its past, experiment with new behaviours, and create new visions and options for the future. It is an organisation in which distinguished "craftspeople" are both inspired visionaries and inventors, *and* masters of detail, noticing and finding strategies, patterns and visions for the future that form from their own behaviour, as well as from sudden flashes of illumination.

For Mintzberg, as for Ansoff (1985), effective planning and learning are about dealing

successfully with today's world while creating the world one wants for tomorrow. These are very important concepts, given this writer's observation that much of the literature tends to imply that change is something to be reacted to, that living in the age of discontinuity is a bit like riding a bucking horse, and that all one can do is hold on tight. Indeed the very definition of discontinuity (cited earlier) suggests that experience counts for nothing when faced with such change. Both Mintzberg and Ansoff have been at the forefront of those who suggest that effective change management and learning (and by implication, for this writer, reflection itself) contain both reactive and creative elements, for which both experience and vision are essential. In this respect, their thinking is reflected in the comments of McGill et al (1992) and Goss et al (1993) cited earlier.

De Gues (1988) is another writer who examined the learning potential of planning processes especially when opportunities exist to explore and reflect on different scenarios in a non-judgemental environment and to value the personal experience of contributors.

The fifth theme identified by Sharratt and Field is the *need to go beyond "single-loop learning"*. As discussed in the previous chapter, Argyris and Schon (1978) adopted the term single-loop learning from cybernetics to describe the process of judging achievements solely in relation to pre-determined goals (as in *Management by Objectives* and most appraisal systems). They saw "double-loop learning" (on-going judgement of the adequacy of organisational goals) and "learning to learn" (improving the capacity of individuals, groups and the organisation as a whole to learn) as key elements of the learning organisation.

Any one of these themes provides a rich and productive opportunity for thinking and research. It was to the last theme, however, that the present writer was drawn, since it implies that learning is a skill in its own right – possibly a "meta-skill" which generates

other skills – and that double-loop learning is potentially the most important learning skill of it, since it is the one which unlocks the other learning skills, both for organisations and individuals.

The previous chapter linked double-loop learning with "third position" reflection, and the concepts of "critical knowing" and "critical subjectivity". It is this aspect of reflective capability which has most pre-occupied and interested this writer in the course of her own practice, and it is the one to which the major part of this chapter is devoted.

Before turning to that, however, it is useful to consider the challenges involved for organisations and the individuals within them, including managers, who would take seriously the effort to develop collective and individual capabilities, including the capacity for sustained and deep reflection.

The challenge of learning in organisational settings

Kempin's (1994) review of the learning literature notes that while individual learning is a pre-condition for organisational learning, it is not sufficient: the learning capacity of a group can be significantly lower than that of the individuals involved unless a range of complementary organisational values, behaviours, attitudes, structures and processes are present to support and encourage learning.

He has identified from the literature eight key characteristics of organisations which positively and effectively facilitate individual and organisational learning:

- a clear, shared organisational vision;

- open and effective communication, co-operation and the sharing of information

and skills;

- participative decision-making and greater equity in work relationships;

- organisational structures and individual work roles which are flexible and facilitate team work;

- individual reflection on experience and organisational review of practices;

- identification of individual and organisational learning goals;

- a physical environment which produces energy, creativity and motivation;

- active encouragement and support of new ideas, experimentation, innovative practices and questioning without fear of punishment.

This is a long and interesting list, which highlights both the potential fragility of organisational learning as well as the complexity of the variables involved. Certainly Goss et al's (1993) review highlighted the importance of focus and commitment on the part of the CEO as being critical in major organisation-wide "reinvention".

Sharrat and Field (1993), having declared their interest in translating organisational learning rhetoric into reality, relate some of their own practical experiences in trying to do so as well as the findings of their own Australian survey of human resource development managers, representing thirty-one different public and private sector organisations.

They conclude that there are significant barriers to organisational learning, including organisational design (most frequently rated as the least supportive of the elements

examined), limitations in the understanding which managers and supervisors have of learning, poor planning and information sharing, limited organisational commitment, and limited understanding (at all levels) of the potential for computer technology to facilitate learning.

While this is only one study, its findings are suggestive of the difficulties, in a purely organisational sense, which surround the creation of learning organisations.

These difficulties – or challenges – are very real ones for anyone who is interested in facilitating learning in organisational settings or in enhancing their own learning. Even without them, the challenge is considerable, given the context of change, uncertainty and turbulence described earlier. As Vaill (1989) asks: how much change, how much uncertainty and how much turbulence can the modern manager handle?

He offers the metaphor of canoeing in "permanent white water", of continual energy and movement. In this environment, things are only very partially under control, yet there is a skilled way of effectively navigating the rapids, that is not the same as random or aimless behaviour. He argues that intelligence, experience and skill are all being executed, albeit in ways that are hard to perceive and describe.

He also cites the metaphor of "Chinese baseball", a mythical game which is just like American baseball in all but one respect: in Chinese baseball, whenever the ball is in the air, anyone is allowed to pick up any base and move it – anywhere. In this "game", there is a time to try and score runs, and a time when trying to score runs would be disastrous. Learning to recognise those times becomes absolutely critical.

With Chinese baseball, Vaill points out, we are talking about a game which no one knows how to play and which entails some serious re-thinking of the rules – including some of the traditional rules about what management work is and how managers need to

behave. In particular, Vaill suggests seven "myths" about management which will not survive in the world of permanent white water and Chinese baseball. These are:

- the myth of a single person called "the manager" or "the leader";
- the myth that what the leader leads and the manager manages is a single, free-standing organisation;
- the myth of control through a pyramidal chain of command;
- the myth of the organisation as pure instrument for the attaining of official objectives;
- the myth of the irrelevance of culture;
- the myth of a product as the organisation's primary output;
- the myth of rational analysis as the chief means of understanding and directing the organisation.

It can be argued that Vaill's seven "myths" represent a fairly complete and concise summary of much of what the management literature suggests about the changing role of those who are titled managers. The point to be made here is that for those who take on the role of manager, the ground rules appear to be changing in some fundamental ways. Whatever the speed of these changes, they represent challenges that can only be met, in this writer's view, by people who are able to facilitate their own continuous learning as well as the continuous learning of others.

Some of the barriers to creating learning organisations have already been mentioned. But in addition to those barriers, this writer would contend that possibly the biggest

hurdle to creating the conditions under which people learn (both collectively and individually) – and learn to learn – is that we are still in the relatively early stages of discovering how to facilitate the kind of learning required in the age of discontinuity. This line of thinking is explored in the next section of this chapter. The reader needs to bear in mind the assumption of the writer that most of what is related here about adult learning implies a fundamental capacity for "sense-making" or reflection.

Facilitating adult learning

> ... learning and changing ... are two of the most basic yet least effectively performed human activities. Learning has been defined as "the process by which behaviour is modified as the result of education and experience" (Mussen et al, 1969). Attempts to understand how learning occurs, and how the continuing interaction between individuals and their environment leads to changes in people's capacity to perform, have been the pre-occupation of behavioural scientists for many decades. Yet it is still not possible to present a complete set of theoretical learning principles which are applicable to all circumstances (Lansbury, 1992).

There *have* been many, many attempts – and it is well beyond the scope of this thesis to helpfully review or even summarise them. Before discussing their collective limitations, however, it is impossible not to acknowledge the seminal work of Reg Revans (1982) and Malcolm Knowles (1978) in the field of adult learning.

The Origins and Growth of Action Learning (Revans, 1982) gives a very comprehensive account of Revan's thinking about the theory and practice of action learning over the last fifty years. As Lessem notes in the introduction to that book, Revans was a pioneer who faced continuous scepticism and hostility – particularly in his own country – in the development of his ideas. Yet Revans not only persisted in finding practical ways to help individuals in organisational settings to learn from and in action, he also tried to develop theoretical explanations for the practices he espoused. "The paradigm of system beta", "the psychology of the deliberated random" and "action learning and epistemology" are all attempts to ground his practice in well-reasoned

constructs.

Whatever the value of his theories, his practice has provided the inspiration for many who in subsequent years have tried to develop their understanding and most particularly, their practice in this field.

Malcolm Knowles in *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (1984, first published 1973) has provided a comprehensive overview of learning theory, including both the "propounders" and the "interpreters" of theory, and suggests that Reese and Overton's (1970) distinction between mechanistic and organismic models or world views gives us a helpful way of grouping learning theories. The mechanistic model offers a view of humankind that is reactive, passive, robot-like, and which sees activity as the result of external forces. The organismic model offers a view that is active, *self-reflective*, and which emphasises the significance of the role of experience in facilitating or inhibiting the course of development.

The work of the Gestalt psychologists such as Koffka (1935), of Piaget (1970) and Bruner (1961), and of Combs and Syngg (1959), among many others, falls clearly into the organismic model, as does the thinking of Knowles himself.

The flavour of the organismic view of the world has been caught by Pittenger and Good (1971):

- people behave in terms of what is real to them and what is related to themselves at the moment of action;

- learning is a process of discovering and reflecting upon personal relationships to and with people, things and ideas;

- when people recognise some inadequacy in the way they currently differentiate or relate to their world, they will try to change it;

- the role of the teacher is to facilitate that process;

- given a healthy organism, positive environmental influences and a non-restrictive set of percepts of self, there appears to be no foreseeable end to the perceptions possible for the individual;

- learning is permanent to the extent that it generates problems that may be shared by others and to the degree that continued sharing itself is enhancing.

Knowles says of himself (1984, p51) that he spent more than three decades trying to formulate a theory of adult learning that takes into account what is known from experience and research about the unique characteristics of adult learners. This "androgogical" theory of adult learning reflects the earlier work of Lindeman (1926) who Knowles believes identified the foundation stones of modern adult learning theory; namely the assumptions that:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; therefore, these are the appropriate starting points for organising adult learning activities.

2. Adults' orientation to learning is life-centred; therefore, the appropriate units for organising adult learning are life situations, not subjects.

3. Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.

4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it.

5. Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning (Knowles, 1984, p31).

In his own writing, Knowles takes these assumptions and develops them still further. He was particularly keen to match the assumptions or principles about adult learning with some androgogical principles of adult teaching.

Reflecting on oneself – the challenge

Arguably one of the most practical techniques described by Knowles (1984, pp222-233) is the formulation of "learning contracts" – a "deal" that the learner makes with him or herself, and others in a learning group or community, to identify and then meet a developmental need which has the potential to make a significant difference to the performance of the individual.

It has been the attempt to work through the contracting process with a large number of individuals in a very varied range of organisational settings, that has alerted this writer to the challenges inherent in diagnosing learning needs accurately and helpfully. At its very best – in others words, when it provides the greatest leverage for changes in behaviour which are of value to the self and others – diagnosis or identification of learning needs engages the deepest levels of reflection, from "third position", resulting in "double-loop" learning, and "re-invention" of some part of oneself.

Table 2: The role of the teacher

Conditions of learning	Principles of teaching
The learners feel a need to learn.	1. The teacher exposes students to new possibilities of self-fulfilment. 2. The teacher helps each student clarify his own aspirations for improved behaviour. 3. The teacher helps each student diagnose the gap between his aspiration and his present level of performance. 4. The teacher helps the students identify the life problems they experience because of the gaps in their personal equipment.
The learning environment is characterised by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences.	5. The teacher provides physical conditions that are comfortable (as to seating, smoking, temperature, ventilation, lighting, decoration) and conducive to interaction preferably, no person sitting behind another person). 6. The teacher accepts each student as a person of worth and respects his feelings and ideas. 7. The teacher seeks to build relationships of mutual trust and helpfulness among the students by encouraging co-operative activities and refraining from inducing competitiveness and judgementalness. 8. The teacher exposes his own feelings and contributes his resources as a colearner in the spirit of mutual inquiry.
The learners perceive the goals of a learning experience to be their goals.	9. The teacher involves the students in a mutual process of formulating learning objectives in which the needs of the students, of the institution, of the teacher, of the subject matter, and of the society are taken into account.
The learners accept a share of the responsibility for planning and operating a learning experience, and therefore have a feeling of commit- ment towards it.	10. The teacher shares his thinking about options available in the designing of learning experiences and the selection of materials and methods and involves the students in deciding among these options jointly.
The learners participate actively in the learning process.	11. The teacher helps the students organise themselves (project groups, learning-teaching teams, independent study, etc) to share responsibility in the process of mutual inquiry.
The learning process is related to and makes use of the experience of the learners.	12. The teacher helps the students exploit their own experiences as resources for learning through the use of such techniques as discussion, role playing, case method, etc. 13. The teacher gears the presentation of his own resources to the levels of experience of his particular students. 14. The teacher helps the students to apply new learning to their experience, and thus to make the learning more meaningful and integrated.
The learners have a sense of progress towards their goals.	15. The teacher involves the students in developing mutually acceptable criteria and methods for measuring progress toward the learning objectives. 16. The teacher helps the students develop and apply procedures for self-evaluation according to these criteria.

(From Knowles, 1984, pp83-85)

The diagnostic process can be relatively straightforward, in this writer's experience,

when the need for learning and change is self-evident and the means for achieving it – in terms of skill or knowledge acquisition is clear. But what about the times when the need or the means are not clear or easy?

In re-reading Knowles for the purpose of this thesis, the writer was struck by two of his statements in particular.

Adults, he asserts, have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept, they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. Yet the minute they walk into an activity labelled "education" or "training", they are apt to "put on" their dunce hats of dependency, fold their arms, sit back, and say, "Teach me" (Knowles, 1984, p56).

Adults, he believes, become ready to learn those things they need to know, and will generally become ready to learn when faced with developmental tasks that genuinely stretch the individual's existing repertoire of skills and knowledge. "It is not necessary to sit by passively and wait for readiness to develop naturally, however. There are ways to induce readiness through exposure to models of superior performance, career counselling, simulation exercises, and other techniques" (Knowles, 1984, p59).

<u>But what if they are not ready</u>?

When this writer's praxis is most truly stretched, it is precisely when the learner's self-concept does not open up the possibilities for change (either self-directed or directed by others), when they are not in a state of readiness, despite the "messages" being given by the world around them, when they are fearful of change, and when there are the kind of "blind spots" that lead people to say, "I have nothing to learn," or, "I don't know what I don't know", or, "I am already skilled enough."

This might sound like a description of a person who is "stuck", or "dependent" or "complacent". This writer would contend that that is potentially a description of any one of us, when asked to operate in third position, to engage in the kind of reflection that is a pre-requisite for "double-loop" learning, when the very assumptions or foundations on which our behaviour or thinking rests are being called into question.

It is at this point that one starts to ask very serious questions of the literature on adult learning – not only of the work of Knowles, but also of those who have followed him. There have been many stimulating – and for this writer – tantalising ideas and techniques offered, but arguably each one of them, when used to tackle the more complex – but potentially most important – areas of learning is seriously tested by some very fundamental aspects of what for want of a better word, might be called our "human condition". Those aspects of ourselves that make it difficult for us to attain "critical subjectivity" about ourselves, to see ourselves from a different perspective, to see ourselves as others see us. Even when we want to, when we are committed to doing it, it is not necessarily easy to have that kind of insight or to "stay with it" long enough to effect sustained behavioural change.

In Chapter 4, the writer mentions that – in collaboration with a colleague – she came to use the concept of "personal scripts". Her working definition of these, as offered to her clients and students, is as follows:

> *Personal scripts are characteristic behaviours which are so much a part of us that, like our skin, we are unaware of them for much of the time; some of our scripts may not be in our awareness at all; nonetheless, they powerfully affect the way we use our skills, engage with others, and understand and think about ourselves and our world.*
>
> *Because we are often unaware of them, they can have powerful – but uncalibrated or uncontrolled – effects on others. In this respect, they can operate like "boomerangs" – things we throw but are unaware of throwing, even when they come back some time later (be it seconds or years later) and hit us on the head; at which point we often ask, "Where the hell did that come from?"*

Personal scripts will, of necessity, be brought into play when one is engaged in any act of learning.

This concept of scripts was developed in a fairly pragmatic way. The writer and her colleague had been studying systems thinking as expounded in Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline* and had been trying to engage with the concept of system archetypes: the deep generative structures which underly the surface pattern of events (often seemingly isolated and unrelated) observed in organisations. Having explored the concept in organisational terms, and decided that "scripts" would be an easier term for clients to accept and understand than "archetypes", it seemed a simple leap to apply the same term to the generative structures which potentially account for much of human behaviour, provided one does not take a rigidly behaviourist view of the human psyche.

The term "scripts" has, of course, been used by others, although that was not in the writer's conscious awareness at the time. For example, Abelson (1981) has explored the psychological status of the script, and Gioia and Poole (1984) have examined the scripts at work in organisational behaviour.

In the sense that the present writer uses it, it is a very broad umbrella term for a whole range of things which potentially "drive" human behaviour from the "inside".

Examples of personal scripts include entrenched habits, unconscious highly skilled behaviour, Argyris and Schon's (1978) "implicit theories" and "theories-in-use", Argyris' (1985) notion of "skilled incompetence" and "defensive routines", Senge's (1990) "mental models" (assumptions, templates, concepts through which we filter and construct reality), the concept of preference (as represented, for example, in the MBTI framework, Myers 1962), learned styles (for example Mumford, 1987), enduring needs and motivations, and the dynamics of personality. As Senge (1990) observes, the more efficient a model of the world – or a script for dealing with it – turns out to be, the more

transparent or invisible it becomes to its owner. Chapter 4 offers an illustration of one of the writer's own personal scripts in action (see "Dominic").

In this writer's thinking, teams might have a "team script" just as organisations (or large sub-sets of them) might have organisational scripts.

The notion of "scripts" is part of this writer's own reflective "theorising" – an attempt to make a higher order level of sense out of her experience and to provide an explanation for that experience. It is introduced here because it is when she evaluates techniques "on offer" from the adult learning literature, she is setting them against the yardstick: "Will they help the processes of reflection which are needed to surface and modify personal scripts, so that double-loop learning can occur?"

Peter Senge's work (1990 and 1994) offers us a number of ideas about how to develop the skills he believes are critical for contemporary organisations and individuals: those skills being the capacity to deal with complexity, creative orientation and reflective dialogue. His five "disciplines" include systemic thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning. Three of these are particularly pertinent in the context of the present discussion.

Personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of developing patience and seeing reality objectively. *Mental models* involves exploring ingrained assumptions, looking inside ourselves and making our own thinking open to the influence of others. This discipline applies to teams and organisations as well as to individuals. *Team learning* involves creating the quality of dialogue and reflection in which all the other disciplines can be practised. It involves inquiry, rather than advocacy, as well as high levels of listening and mutual respect.

Although an inspiring work for many, for others the work of Senge and other writers

leaves a great deal to be desired. Here is Garvin's (1993) reaction:

> Sound idyllic? Absolutely. Desirable? Without question. But does it provide a framework for action? Hardly. The recommendations are far too abstract and too many questions remain unanswered. How, for example, will managers know when their companies become learning organisations? What concrete changes in behaviour are required? What policies and paradigms must be in place? How do you get from here to there?

Most discussions of learning organisations finesse these issues. Their focus is high philosophy and grand themes, sweeping metaphors rather than the gritty details of practice (Garvin, 1993, p79).

Writing in the Harvard Business Review, Garvin probably speaks for many others. Anecdotal though it may be, this writer's whole experience and effort over the past seven years – indeed, the production of this thesis – has been driven by the need to find practical ways to operationalise the "high philosophy" and "sweeping metaphors".

Garvin's own solution appears to be to resort to the methodologies inspired by the quality movement and its associated practices of continuous improvement (Demming, 1982). These include systematic problem-solving (relying on Demming's scientific method – the "Plan, Do, Check, Act" cycle – which is very similar in practice to the action learning cycle described in Chapter 2, p38; insisting on data rather than assumptions; and using simple statistical tools); systematic experimentation; learning from experience; learning from others; and transferring knowledge.

These are all excellent tools, as their "take-up rate" in both Japan, and increasingly in the Western world attests. It would be foolish for anyone – including this writer – to simply dismiss them as "not good enough". Clearly, these are powerful tools for enabling organisations, teams and individuals to significantly enhance their products, services and practices. To this writer, however, it seems that they do not, in and of themselves, guarantee a shift in the personal scripts of the individual actors involved.

They might create all the right conditions for that to happen, but, as the saying goes, one can lead a horse to water, but have difficulty making it drink.

This perception of the writer is based on her experience, over many years – but most particularly in the last seven – in trying to help people review and if necessary, enrich, extend or modify their "scripted" behaviour. Senge (1990) at one point describes to us the "ladder of inference" – a method for helping to surface and test the assumptions which are bound up in people's mental models – and invites us to gently lead people up and down this ladder. De Gues (1988, p74) asserts that "institutional learning begins with the calibration of existing mental models." In this writer's view, these statements are "magnificent one-liners" but devilishly difficult to practice – and for good reasons, some of which are discussed in what follows.

The emotional cost of learning

Robin Snell (1988, 1989), among others (for example Burgoyne, 1976, Mumford, 1980, Kolb, 1984 and McCall et al, 1988) has researched on-the-job managerial learning and development. He suggests that the majority of such learning is triggered for managers not by them deliberately searching out problems and learning opportunities, but as a response to problems or situations thrust upon them by others. He was struck by the levels of what he calls "distress" embodied in managers' learning practices – and he defines distress as "mental pain, severe pressure of want or danger or fatigue" (Snell, 1989, p23). Common triggers for learning include negative feedback, "big mistakes", being overstretched, being under threat, impasse, injustice, losing out, being on the receiving end of poor role modelling and being under personal attack. As Snell points out, these are not the only things that trigger learning and the alternatives can be very positive and pleasant experiences – such as learning from others, being presented with challenging but essentially enjoyable tasks. Some individuals display high levels of what he calls "natural curiosity", actively seeking out new experiences and seeing

almost every experience – new or not – as an opportunity for learning.

Nonetheless, Snell's over-riding conclusion was that the managers researched "had not used the full range of possible learning patterns and had undergone unnecessary pain and discomfort in their learning ... the implications are that managers need help in combining productivity, elegance and opportunism in their choice and use of learning patterns" (Snell, 1985, p322).

Apart from anything else, Snell suggests that managers should be taught to turn "hard knocks" to advantage, so that such experiences are the trigger for positive rather than negative learning and experience. He also believes that a small amount of planned uncertainty and discomfort, here and now, could yield crucial learning and spare much unexpected pain at a later date. Along with Honey (1989), he advocates that managers need to be taught to be opportunistic learners, to learn when they can, not when they must.

Snell's work makes very interesting reading when put side by side with that of Knowles cited earlier. The reality of adult learning, and what seems to trigger it in practice, appears to be complex in ways that are not directly acknowledged in Knowles' work.

If one has even idly dipped into some of the massive literature which has accumulated on the subject of leading and managing change in organisations, one would recognise some of the issues which Snell raises when discussing managerial learning. Indeed, the message of that literature is so powerful, that it has led a number of Australian commentators to observe that the single biggest leadership challenge facing organisations today is how to make change a trigger to positive learning and development at all levels of the organisation, instead of the beginning of widespread anxiety, resistance and cynicism (see, for example, Dunphy & Stace, 1990).

In a later article, Snell (1990) describes a number of what he calls "psychological-cultural" blockages to learning and some that he describes as "structural" blockages. These correlate well with the present writer's concepts of personal and organisational scripts, respectively.

Psychological-cultural blocks he sees as being resistances within the person which are also rooted in the systems of values and beliefs within groups and societies. One such blockage is a *failure to learn from "hard knocks"*, resulting in the person sinking into psychological withdrawal, burnout, cynicism or chronic disillusionment, drawing on bad feelings rather than focussing on improvement. People experiencing the blockage may put all their energies into blame and desire for retribution, or cling obsessively to old plans, ignoring their own feelings and those of others.

Another barrier is *"fear of perturbation"* (Snell, 1990, p18). Opening out to perturbation requires one to accept the risks attached to confusion and self-discovery. Harrison (1962) suggests that while we all may have a "need to know", we also adopt defence mechanisms to maintain stability in our lifestyles and relationships. Casey (1987) suggests that the prospect of self-discovery is frightening to many managers who have coped for years by denying areas of ignorance or incompetence. Snell, (1990, p18) remarks:

> My hunch is that the strongest defences stem from *bitter* experiences. The prospect of learning through "live" experience is daunting because we are most aware of the need for experiential learning when we face threat or adversity; confusion is associated with set-backs and worry rather than with excitement, and self-discovery with horrific bad news about oneself. I see a parallel between emotional blockage to experiential learning opportunities and the way formal learning occasions have for some managers become associated with distressing memories of sarcasm, boredom and intimidation in the school classroom.

Obsession with short term results and an unwillingness to take time out for adventure and reflection can be a significant barrier. In organisations fixated on results achieved

in short time spans – which could be most organisations – being "open to perturbation" can seem like a waste of valuable time which would be better spent in delivering on the bottom line. Goss et al (1993) among others notes the "doing trap" – the sense that many organisations and individuals have that if they are not engaged in continual activity, they are not working: taking time out to sit and think or read, while revered in Japan, would be seen as "opting out" or "resting" in Australia. The "doing trap" can result in a situation where the individual or organisation does the same thing over and over again, but expects different results. When engaged in frantic activity, it can be difficult to accept that if you want a different result, you will have to do something different.

It has certainly been the recurring experience of this writer that getting people to take time out to reflect on what they are doing, why they are doing it and how they might do it differently or better, even though a seemingly task-related activity is often a major challenge in itself. Getting them to reflect systematically on *themselves* is that much harder.

Lack of an appropriate world-view is another barrier, according to Snell. "Freebie learning opportunities are legion", he suggests,

> but taking them demands at least a recognition that it is worth paying attention to the special concerns of other people, and ideally a combination of independence of mind and curiosity about and respect for other people... It entails a "worldview" that ... brings with it an awareness of multiple ways of perceiving, valuing and acting in social settings ... and ... delights in paradox, ambiguity and the exploration of differences in order to resolve complex and disparate social, political or aesthetic problems (Snell, 1990, p19).

Snell (1990), Honey (1989), Fisher et al (1987) and Argyris (1982, 1990) have all reported pessimism about this. The findings of Fisher et al suggest that on top of a reluctance to open out to perturbation, many managers make scant use of the free learning opportunities that greet them day-to-day. Argyris has regularly argued that

nearly every organisational context induces distorted information, reinforces mistrust and deception and encourages games of coercion, resistance, protection and attack.

Argyris (1990) has explored some of the structural barriers that seem to limit the capacity of individuals and teams to process information. He describes the tendencies – aggravated even more by the pyramidal and authoritarian structure of most organisations above a certain size – to engage in games of covering up, working to rule, control and self-defence. Such covering up is endemic, he believes, and in order to prevent embarrassment or threat, covering-up the cover-up becomes a well-practised skill, resulting in the existence of "undiscussables" and high levels of self-deception. He suggests that even highly-educated professionals engage in what he calls organisational defensive routines to preserve their status and abiding sense of security.

Argyris advocates "Model II" learning, which invites people to deal with incongruence, inconsistency, lack of clarity and ambiguity by confronting them constructively. He concludes, however, that this requires that people learn new ways of collaborative learning and is pessimistic about this happening as long as competitive win-lose, low-risk-taking interactions are rewarded and co-operative problem-solving high-risk-taking interventions are suppressed.

Martin (1993) writes in similar vein, describing how people, in searching for the source of problems, often want to look outside themselves, and often outside the company, blaming the stupidity of the customer or client, the vagueness of strategic goals, or the unpredictability of the environment.

In Martin's view, however, organisations defend against change not because they are just like insecure individuals, but because they are made up of individuals (many of whom might also be insecure!) who are working at what has always worked. And organisations' practices (one aspect of their "scripts") may provide a powerful context

for inertia. To understand and break out of that inertia, they must be capable of "third position" thinking at an organisational level, to be able to understand their own life story, how they got to be where they are, and what "where they are" truly looks like.

Martin goes on to describe how the articulation of a founder's vision, the consolidation of steering and control mechanisms, the deterioration in necessary feedback and the proliferation of organisational defensive routines, all combine to provide what Snell (1990) calls structural barriers to reflection on why they have come to act the way they do.

> Why is this? (Martin asks, 1993, p83). Because people are not at their best when faced with a largely uncertain future. Traumatised by past events, they determine never, never to make the same mistake again – and wind up mistaking the old crisis for the new one. They fear for their jobs or even for the jobs of the people who have been counting on their judgement. They fear their bosses or their boards. They avert their eyes from quantitative evidence contradicting their expectation. They snap at people who give voice to their repressed doubts. They demonise the competition, scoff at customers, infantilise themselves, and parentalise the CEO ... corruption begins when people start saying one thing and thinking another.

None of this is good news for those who must live successfully in the age of discontinuity. Is there anything to be done about it? Some of the suggestions offered in the literature are explored in the last part of this chapter.

Reflection-in-action: a "kind of knowing"

The previous discussion has highlighted some of the challenges associated with learning and the reflection that makes up one of the tools of learning. Arguably, however, the kind of reflection that leads to insight and learning is made difficult by another aspect of the human condition. This is the issue described so helpfully – for this writer, at any rate – by Schon (1987) in his book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*.

In the Preface to this book, Schon remarks that the book attempts, among other things, to answer the question: "What kind of professional education would be appropriate to an epistemology of practice based on reflection-in-action?" He suggests that:

> university-based professional schools should learn from such deviant traditions of education practice as studies of art and design, conservatories of music and dance, athletics coaching, and apprenticeship in the crafts, all of which emphasise coaching and learning by doing. Professional education should be redesigned to combine the teaching of applied science with coaching in the artistry of reflection-in-action... The generalised educational setting, derived from the design studio, is a *reflective practicum*. Here students mainly learn by doing, with the help of coaching. Their practicum is "reflective" in two senses: it is intended to help students become proficient in a kind of reflection-in-action; and, when it works well, it involves a dialogue of coach and student that takes the form of reciprocal reflection-in-action (Schon, 1987, pxii).

A major point of departure for Schon is the observation that:

> in the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of the situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern (Schon, 1987, p3).

Such messy, problematic situations arise when the task or issue falls outside the categories of existing theory and technique, when there are serious conflicts among the values that are being brought to bear on the situation, or when there are varying multi-disciplinary perspectives available to us. These indeterminate zones of practice – characterised by uncertainty, uniqueness, conflict and confusion – sit apart from the canons of technical rationality. Yet, in an age of discontinuity, arguably these are precisely the sorts of situations which become central to professional – and certainly managerial – practice. Schon argues that this has resulted in some crises of confidence – both with respect to the confidence that society has in some of its most time-honoured professions, such as medicine and the law, and with respect to the professional schools that have produced these practitioners.

He suggests that one solution is to reverse the traditional relationship between education and competent practice. Instead of making the assumption that competent practice is drawn from the "high ground" of professional educational preparation, he invites us to ask what we can learn from a careful examination of artistry – that is, the competence by which practitioners actually handle indeterminate zones of practice.

Artistry he defines as:

> an exercise of intelligence, a kind of knowing, though different in crucial respects from a standard model of professional knowledge. It is not inherently mysterious; it is rigorous in its own terms; and we can learn a great deal about it ... by carefully studying the performance of unusually competent performers.

Schon uses the term professional artistry to refer to the kinds of competence practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain and conflicted situations of practice. He observes, however, that their artistry is a high-powered, esoteric variant of the more familiar sort of competence all of us exhibit every day in countless acts of recognition, judgement and skilled performance.

What is striking about both kinds of competence is that they do not depend on our being able to describe what we know how to do, or even to entertain in conscious thought the knowledge our actions reveal. We know the "feel of things" – the feel of "hitting the ball right", and we can readily detect when something is wrong, but it is often easier for us to describe deviations from "normal" performance or experience than it is to describe the norm itself. Schon uses the term "knowing-in-action" to describe spontaneous skilful performance which we are unable to make verbally explicit.

Ultimately, Schon's line of thinking poses to us some very interesting questions: What forms does learning – and reflective learning – take when neither learner nor coach can readily articulate in words either that current state of "knowingness" or competence and

what it consists of (in other words, the whole range of mental models, habits and unconscious skills and other personal scripts that sit behind it), or what is involved in developing it, enriching it or sharing it?

If reflection is about sense-making, how can sense-making happen when words don't come easily and concepts are difficult to articulate? What are the forms of communication available to coach and student under these circumstances? On what factors does effective communication depend? In the design studio, when both coach and student are working as practitioners, what will their interaction be like? What will help and hinder it?

Schon himself suggests that skilled practitioners often effect learning tacitly through what he calls "reflection-in-action". The process as he describes it is very similar to the action-learning cycle described in Chapter 2. We begin by bringing to a situation spontaneous, routinized responses ("first position" behaviour in the terms of the writer), which produces an unexpected outcome – a "surprise", whether pleasant or unpleasant – that does not fit the categories of our knowing-in-action. Surprise leads to reflection within an action-present ("second position" behaviour) in which we ask ourselves, "What's happened? What do I need to do differently?" Reflection then triggers "on-the-spot" experimentation which leads to adjustment of the behaviour. This whole process might occur very quickly, appear very skilled to an independent observer, and might not be articulated at a conscious level by the person involved (in other words, there might be no "third position" reflection at all). It is epitomised by the skilled improvisation displayed by jazz musicians or dancers, who must "feel" where the music or steps are going, rather than "thinking it through".

These ideas of Schon pose an entirely different set of challenges for those who wish to use reflection to facilitate their own learning or the learning of others. What happens when we don't have the words to say it?

Using metaphor when the words don't come easily

Nonaka (1991) has come at this question from an organisation perspective – and the perspective of organisations whose need in the information age is for "knowledge-creating".

He suggests that creating and implementing new knowledge (that is, innovating) is not simply a matter of "processing" objective information – that it depends, rather, on tapping the tacit and often highly subjective insights, intuitions and hunches of individuals, and making those insights available for learning and use by the company as a whole. This will not happen, he suggests, without personal commitment and trust, based on shared understanding and accurate collective insight into what the organisation stands for, where it is going, what kind of world it wants to live in, and how to make that world a reality. It also implies the commitment and energy to go on re-creating and renewing the organisation and everyone in it.

In this process, tacit knowledge and understanding needs to be made explicit, in order to be shared and for innovation to happen. Explicit knowledge is formal and systematic, can be communicated in product specifications or a scientific formula or a computer program.

But as Nonaka points out, the tacit knowledge that is the source of innovation can be highly personal, hard to formulate. In the words of the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1958), we know more than we can tell.

> Tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in action and in an individual's commitment to a specific context – a craft or profession, a particular technology or product market, or the activities of a work group or team. Tacit knowledge consists partly of technical skills – the kind of informal, hard-to-pin-down skills captured in the term "know how". A master craftsman after years of experience develops a wealth of expertise "at his fingertips". But he is often unable to articulate the

> scientific or technical principles behind what he knows. At the same time, tacit knowledge has an important cognitive dimension. It consists of mental models, beliefs and perspectives so ingrained that we take them for granted, and therefore cannot easily articulate them (Nonaka, 1991, p98).

Nonaka goes on to suggest four basic patterns for creating knowledge or learning in any organisation:

- from tacit to tacit (through observation, imitation and practice, as in "apprenticeship"); in this pattern, neither the apprentice nor the master gains any systematic (i.e. shareable) insight into their craft knowledge and so it cannot easily be leveraged by the organisation as a whole;

- from explicit to explicit (collecting, combining and synthesising many existing pieces of explicit knowledge from different parts of the organisation); this combination does not really extend the organisation's knowledge base, although it might make it more accessible to more likely to be used;

- from tacit to explicit (the conversion of local knowledge into explicit knowledge that can be accessed, used and enhanced by others);

- from explicit to tacit (the internalisation of knowledge by others, so that their own "artistry", to use Schon's term, is broadened, extended and reframed).

These four patterns of learning are vital for the knowledge-creating company, but they all depend on being able, at some point, to articulate that knowledge.

Nonaka acknowledges that this means finding ways to "express the unexpressible" and he makes some suggestions about how that might be done. He points to what he regards as one of the most frequently overlooked management tools: the store of

figurative language and symbolism that managers can draw from to articulate their intuitions and insights. He says that this evocative and sometimes highly poetic knowledge figures very prominently in product development in certain Japanese companies.

One kind of figurative language that he sees as being especially important is metaphor.

> By metaphor, I don't just mean a grammatical structure or allegorical expression. Rather, metaphor is a distinctive method of perception. It is a way for individuals grounded in different contexts and with different experiences to understand something intuitively through the use of imagination and symbols without the need for analysis or generalisation. Through metaphor, people put together that they know in new ways and begin to express what they know and cannot yet say (Nonaka, 1991, p100).

Metaphors not only start the dialogue, but by establishing a connection between two things that seem only distantly related, metaphors set up a discrepancy or conflict, suggest multiple meanings and thus can carry dialogue into truly creative effort.

Schon (1987) offers us a number of suggestions as to what forms reflection might take when the knowledge or skill being developed is initially – or even mainly – tacit. His suggestions flow from using the models of the design studio (as in architecture) and the master class (as in drama or music).

The coach, for example, observes as the student makes a "local" experiment (that is, dealing with some small component of the whole task), and then asks the student to observe the effect of what they have done; the coach might then "re-frame" the problem, by asking the student to view the local experiment in the context of the whole, inviting attention to oscillate between the whole and the unit; experimentation itself might lead, eventually, to a re-framing of the whole.

But what happens when the current situation – brought to light by the student's task or

efforts – is unique? How does the skilled coach-practitioner make use of his/her accumulated experience? When familiar categories of theory or technique cannot be applied, how is prior experience brought to bear on the invention of new frames, theories and categories of action?

Schon's suggestion is in some respects like the technique suggested by Nonaka: the skilled practitioner has, in fact, built up a repertoire of examples, images, understandings and actions, and he or she uses one or more of these – not as templates for the unfamiliar situation which confronts them now; they cannot be templates since they are essentially different from what is at hand – but rather as metaphors. By treating the current unfamiliar situation as if it were something else, the practitioner opens up possibilities for dealing with it.

Both coach and students are assisted in dealing with the unfamiliar if they engage in what Schon calls "rigorous experimentation" – being fully open to the evidence which the experiment produces, be it failure or success. The coach must also have the ability to construct and manipulate "virtual worlds" for the purposes of experimentation – these constructed worlds are a representation of the real world of practice.

Schon's entire work was very stimulating to this writer – as has been acknowledged already. However, it has to be said that his writings are more suggestive than prescriptive, and the book could not in any sense of the word be described as a "how-to" manual. That is very much in keeping with his subject matter. The master craftsman can suggest and indicate, can supply metaphors and possibilities, but at the end of the day, the development of complex practice is in the hands of the practitioner herself. In Chapters 4 and 5, the writer will describe the way in which her own practice was developing in parallel with the development of her understanding, and how the two were finally integrated in her own praxis.

Applications to the development of praxis

Accepting that reality, Schon's writing was not only helpful to the present writer in exploring the nature of reflection, but also in understanding the science of praxeology – or the theory of practice. She will return to that theme in the next chapter. However, the challenge of the development of skilled practice is nicely illustrated in Schon's account of the "paradox of learning to design". This account is quoted at length, because Schon's own words seem to this writer to be more helpful than her own "translation" could be at this point.

> Initially, the student does not and cannot understand what designing means. He finds the artistry of thinking like an architect to be elusive, obscure, alien, and mysterious. Moreover, even if he were able to give a plausible verbal description of designing – to intellectualise about it – he would still be unable to meet the requirement that he demonstrate an understanding of designing *in the doing*.
>
> From his observation of the students' performance, the studio master realises that they do not at first understand the essential things. He sees, further, that he cannot explain these things with any hope of being understood, at least at the outset, because they can be grasped only through the experience of actual designing. Indeed, many studio masters believe, along with Leftwich, that there are essential "covert things" that can never be explained; either the student gets them in the doing, or he does not get them at all. Hence the Kafkaesque situation in which the student must "hang on to the inflection of the tone of voice ... to discover if something is really wrong."
>
> The design studio shares in a general paradox attendant on the teaching and learning of any really new competence or understanding: for the student seeks to learn things whose meaning and importance she cannot grasp ahead of time. She is caught in the paradox Plato describes so vividly in his dialogue the *Meno*. There, just as Socrates induces Meno to admit that he hasn't the least idea what virtue is, Meno bursts out with this question:
>
> > But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know? (Plato, 1956, p128).
>
> Like Meno, the design student knows she needs to look for something but does not know what the something is. She seeks to learn it, moreover, in the sense of coming to know it *in action*. Yet, at the beginning, she can neither do it nor recognise it when she sees it. Hence, she is caught up in a self-contradiction:

> "looking for something" implies a capacity to recognise the thing one looks for, but the student lacks at first the capacity to recognise the object of her search. The instructor is caught up in the same paradox: he cannot tell the student what she needs to know, even if he has words for it, because the student would not at that point understand him.
>
> The logical paradox of the *Meno* accurately describes the experience of learning to design. It captures the very feelings of mystery, confusion, frustration, and futility that many students experience in their early months or years of architectural study. Yet most students do attempt to carry out the paradoxical task.
>
> The student discovers that she is expected to learn, by doing, both what designing is and how to do it. The studio seems to rest on the assumption that it is only in this way that she can learn. Others may help her, but they can do so only as she begins to understand for herself the process she finds initially mysterious. And although they may help her, *she* is the essential self-educator. In this respect, the studio tradition of design education is consistent with an older and broader tradition of educational thought and practice, according to which the most important things – artistry, wisdom, virtue – can only be learned for oneself (Schon, 1987, pp82-84).

This is perhaps a hard message given the urgency expressed by Nonaka (cited earlier) for ways of speeding up and making more effective the transfer and creation of knowledge.

It was a hard lesson for the writer, who had hoped against all hope that there were some "quick ways" to effect high level reflection, to get to "third position" and stay there for long enough – or regularly enough – to generate significant shifts in understanding and practice. As Schon so astutely observes, however, there are some things that one can only learn for oneself, and Chapter 4 recounts how this writer had to learn that particular lesson for herself.

None of this means, of course, that the facilitator is irrelevant and can do nothing to enhance the quality of learning, including reflective learning. Nor does it mean that there are not ways of working with oneself to enhance one's own learning and reflective capabilities. It does suggest, however, that the behaviours to be used are much more subtle and much more complex than a glance at much of the literature on the learning

organisation would suggest.

And it is fitting that it should be so. As human beings are "infinite in their variety" (to misquote Shakespeare), their behaviour and the tasks they set for themselves both inside and outside of occupational settings are only as limited as the human imagination itself. Management is certainly a field that warrants Schon's description of the mess and confusion in the "swampy lowland". As Livingstone (1970, p101) observed:

> Management is a highly individual art. What style works well for one manager in a particular situation may not produce the desired results for another manager in a similar situation, or even for the same manager in a different situation. There is no one best way for all managers to manage in all situations. Every manager must discover for himself, therefore, what works and what does not work for him in different situations. He cannot become effective merely by adopting the practices or the managerial style of someone else. He must develop his own natural style and follow practices that are consistent with his own personality.
>
> Livingstone goes on to suggest that all managers need to learn that, in order to be successful, they must manage in a way that is consistent with their unique personalities. Managers who adopt artificial styles or follow practices that are not consistent with their own personalities are likely not only to be distrusted by others, but to be ineffective. He quotes Ghiselli's (1969) studies of managerial talent which suggested that people who display the greatest individuality in managerial behaviour are generally the ones judged to be the real managers.

Livingstone observes that managers are rarely taught how to manage in ways that are consistent with their own personalities. Rather, in many formal education and training programs, they are taught to follow a prescribed set of practices in order to get the highest productivity, lowest costs and best performance.

If, however, an organisation wants growth in the deepest sense, then one must agree with Brouwer (1964), that something more subtle and more basic in its impact is called for in the management development effort. Such deeper growth may entail a change in self-concept – certainly in self-understanding. The manager who once was unreliable in his or her judgement, or who lacked drive grows toward reliability in judgement or

towards stronger drive.

> Growth in this sense brings observable changes in outward behaviour, because each person is now inwardly different – different, for example, in his perception of himself, in his attitude toward his job and his company as both relate to his own life, or his feeling of responsibility for others.
>
> But experience shows that such growth is as difficult to achieve as it is desirable. It demands the full-fledged participation of the manager... He does not change because he is told to, exhorted to, or because it is the thing to do.
>
> Such growth implies changes in the man himself – in how he uses his knowledge, in the ends to which he applies his skills, and, in short, in his view of himself. The point is clear that the growing person examines himself; and as he does do, he emerges with new depths of motivation, a sharper sense of direction, and a more vital awareness of how he wants to live on the job. Growth in this sense is personalised and vital. And such growth in self-concept is at the heart of a real manager development effort (Brouwer, 1964, p38).

Accepting the complexity and individuality of the individual, and accepting the challenges that poses for the practitioner in the field of learning, nonetheless, that practitioner must soldier on, attempting to craft a praxis that is fit for the task.

This did not mean, among other things, abandoning the literature, or deciding that the experience reflected in it counts for nothing. Quite the reverse! If anything this writer re-doubled her efforts to make constructive use of the available literature. But, hopefully, she became more discerning in her use of it, and eventually (as Chapter 5 describes) found her way back through the literature to the books and wisdom which had been offered to her when she was still an apprentice, learning the craft of counselling.

In the final section of this chapter, however, the writer continues to draw on other literature on learning which has been helpful in framing her own praxis – her own combination of theory and practice.

Other lessons from the literature

The reading of Schon's work, which has already been so extensively quoted here, continued to be remarkably suggestive of the sorts of things that would be helpful for this writer in her own practice. For example, in describing the way that good coaches are able to make helpful connections between previous experiences and unfamiliar ones, using previous experience as metaphors, rather than templates, Schon makes the point that the richer the range of the coach's experience, the richer and more complete the range of metaphors that can be offered. The capacity to intuitively tap into one's own experience, seeking out the images and metaphors that will make most sense, is clearly a helpful asset.

He describes the "ladder of reflection", the first rung of which is the taking of action, the second of which is describing the action, the third reflection or dialogue on the description of the action, and the fourth and highest rung is "reflection on reflection/dialogue on description of the action" (Schon, 1987, p115). This line of thinking sat well with the writer's own formulation of first, second and third position thinking.

The potential pit-falls are highlighted: the student "overlearning" the coach's message, construing it as a set of expert procedures to be followed in each situation; developing a "closed-system vocabulary" in which the student can state the coach's principles while performing in a manner incongruent with them and remaining unaware of that fact; the student becoming a "counter-learner", refusing to suspend disbelief and be open to new ideas.

The use of modelling, demonstration and imitation is discussed by Schon. In fact, both Schon and Knowles (1978) relate a story about Carl Rogers which – as well as illustrating a powerful lesson about the art of modelling – had the even more important

effect, for this writer, of propelling her back to the literature she had been very familiar with while a post-graduate student in psychology, but had totally neglected for well over ten years. That part of the story will be taken up in Chapter 5.

The story – or rather statement – which will be recounted in Roger's (1969, p277) own words, obviously struck a powerful chord with two writers and thinkers who were themselves distinguished in their field. Rogers was presenting some personal reflections on teaching and learning to a group of teachers assembled at Harvard University.

a. My experience has been that I cannot teach another person how to teach. To attempt it is for me, in the long run, futile.

b. It seems to me that anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential and has little or no significant influence on behaviour. That sounds so ridiculous that I can't help but question it at the same time I present it.

c. I realise increasingly that I am only interested in learnings which significantly influence behaviour. Quite possibly this is simply a personal idiosyncrasy.

d. I have come to feel that only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.

e. Such self-discovered learning, truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience, cannot be directly communicated to another. As soon as an individual tries to communicate such experience directly, often with a quite natural enthusiasm, it becomes teaching, and its results are inconsequential. It was some relief recently to discover that Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, has found this, too, in his own experience, and stated it very clearly a century ago. It made it seem less absurd.

f. As a consequence of the above, I realise that I have lost interest in being a teacher.

g. When I try to teach, as I do sometimes, I am appalled by the results, which seem a little more than inconsequential, because sometimes the teaching appears to succeed. When this happens, I find that the results are damaging. It seems to cause the individual to distrust his own experience and to stifle significant learning. Hence I have come to feel that the outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful.

h. When I look back at the results of my past teaching, the real results seem the same – either damage was done, or nothing significant occurred. This is frankly troubling.

i. As a consequence, I realise that I am only interested in being a learner, preferably learning things that matter, that may have some significant influence on my own behaviour.

j. I find it very rewarding to learn, in groups, in relationship with one person as in therapy, or by myself.

k. I find that one of the best, but most difficult, ways for me to learn is to drop my own defensiveness, at least temporarily, and to try to understand the way in which this experience seems and feels to the other person.

l. I find that another way of learning for me is to state my own uncertainties, to try to clarify my puzzlement, and thus get closer to the meaning that my experience actually seems to have.

m. The whole train of experiencing, and the meanings that I have thus far discovered in it, seem to have launched me on a process which is both fascinating and at times a little frightening. It seems to mean letting my experience carry me on, in a direction which appears to be forward, toward that I can but dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current meaning of that experience. The sensation is that of floating with a complex stream of experience, with the fascinating possibility of trying to comprehend its ever-changing reality (Rogers, 1969, p277).

Rogers himself recounts that on the day, his words struck a powerful chord with the assembled teachers, not a particularly positive one, as feelings ran high. He says, "it was a very thought-provoking session. I question whether any participant in that session has ever forgotten it" (Rogers, 1969, p277)

Not only is Rogers, in this statement, saying something very important about what can happen when learners become dependent, and how their facilitators can inadvertently allow that to happen, it contains – for this writer, at least – a very timely reminder about the value of the qualities of authenticity, openness and higher-order listening when in dialogue with others. These were all qualities to which the writer was exposed as a student, which she had read about and had tried to practice. But in reading these words of Rogers, after an absence of so many years, it suddenly became very important to revisit that literature and make sense of it all over again.

It should be acknowledged that Schon stimulated that interest to "revisit" in another way. His book contains a couple of very substantial chapters in which he applies his ideas about the "reflective practitioner" to artistry in the fields of psychoanalytic practice, counselling and consulting. The latter are the fields in which the writer herself practices, and so Schon's insights were, hopefully, going to be of great assistance.

Working with mental models: a particular kind of personal scripting

In fact, Schon relates the experience which he and Chris Argyris had in over fifteen years of working together to develop a theory and practice of competent interpersonal behaviour. They proposed (Argyris & Schon, 1974) that human beings in their interactions with one another *design* their behaviour and hold theories for doing so. These theories of action include the values, strategies and underlying assumptions that inform individuals' patterns of interpersonal behaviour. (The present writer would regard these as being personal scripts.) They distinguished two levels at which theories of action operate: espoused theories that we use to explain or justify our behaviour (for example, the manager who espouses openness and freedom of expression – as in, "my door is always open"); and theories-in-use, which are the tacit, implicit theories expressed in our spontaneous behaviour with others. Like other kinds of "knowing in action", we may be unable to describe them, and we might be surprised to discover that they are actually incongruent with the theories we espouse.

Argyris and Schon have described "theories-in-use" in some organisational settings (especially situations characterised by difficulty or stress) as having "Model I" values or strategies. Some Model I characteristics are set out in Table 3. "Model II", by comparison (see Table 4), has governing variables which include valid information, internal commitment, and free and informed choice. Model II aims at creating open dialogue even about difficult and sensitive matters, subjecting private dilemmas to

shared inquiry and making public tests of negative attributions that Model I keeps private and undiscussable. Model II encourages double-loop learning, in which there is a dialogue about the governing variables and assumptions that underlie behavioural strategies. For example, there might be dialogue about the fact that two people have been colluding to keep from discussing issues that might bring them into open conflict.

Schon relates the experience that he and Argyris had in conducting seminars and workshops at Harvard and MIT. They had offered to their students what Schon calls "Model II heuristics", such as:

- capable advocacy of your position with inquiry into the other's beliefs;

- state the attribution you are making, tell how you got to it, and ask for the other's confirmation or disconfirmation;

- if you experience a dilemma, express it publicly.

As the writer would say, if asked ... "all very rational, very reasonable, but ... !"

Table 3: Characteristics of Model I

Governing Variable for Action	Action Strategies for Actor	Consequences for Actor and His Associates	Consequences for Learning	Effectiveness
Achieve the purposes as I perceive them	Design and manage environment so that actor is in control over factors relevant to me	Actor seen as defensive	Self-sealing	
Maximise winning and minimise losing	Own and control task	Defensive inter-personal and group relation-ships	Single-loop learning	Decreased
Minimise eliciting negative feelings	Unilaterally protect self	Defensive norms	Little public testing of theories	
Be rational and minimise emotionality				

(From Schon, 1987, p257)

Table 4: Characteristics of Model II

Governing Variable for Action	Action Strategies for Actor	Consequences for Actor and His Associates	Consequences for Learning	Effectiveness
Valid information	Design situations or encounters where participants can be origins and experience high personal causation	Actor seen as minimally defensive	Testable processes	
Free and informed choice	Task is controlled jointly	Minimally defensive inter-personal re-lations and group dynamics	Double-loop learning	Increased
Internal commitment to the choice and constant monitoring of the implementation	Protection of self is a joint enterprise, oriented towards growth	Learning-oriented norms	Frequent public testing of theories	
	Bilateral protection of others	High freedom of choice, internal commitment, and risk-taking		

(From Schon, 987, p.259)

Schon then comments that they became aware of a cycle of failure they analysed in the following way:

- when students felt vulnerable to threat, they would produce "automatic intercepts": negative feelings like anger, resentment, fear or impatience would trigger such automatic Model I responses as "blowing up", withdrawal, withholding of information considered dangerous, or projection of anger on to others;

- typically, a student would be at first unaware of the feeling that triggered his or her reaction, and would experience failure;

- even once the feelings were identified, the student would experience dilemma and frustration at not knowing how to accurately and quickly recognise, and

then constructively express the feeling that had triggered the Model I response.

Argyris and Schon realised that to process – and manage – these sorts of feelings and reactions "on-line" under conditions of stress and speed would be asking too much of trainee counsellors (and sometimes of more experienced practitioners as well). They offered their students the following advice:

- do not try to be complete or perfect;

- do not be afraid to correct or modify what you had to say "on-line", after you've thought about it;

- identify the major meanings that you infer from what the person is saying and is expressing through non-verbal language; if you believe your inferences validly represent the other's meanings, go ahead and respond;

- advocate your position as clearly as you can, and combine it with an invitation for challenge and correction;

- do not hesitate to be incomplete, in the sense of expressing only one of several possible positions;

- if you are incomplete, you can say and/or own up to it later.

Although this advice produced some improvements in the rate and quality of learning, they believed that students still somehow hadn't quite got the hang of Model II interventions, having not given up their own Model I behavioural patterns of wanting to maintain control over others, protect themselves and others from confrontation and look to the leader for confirmation and support. They noticed that students hold

unrealistically high expectations of their own performance; saw error as failure, and repeated failure as a blow to self-esteem; were ambivalent toward their instructors, feeling that they (the students) were performing under scrutiny, and yet competing with one another for their instructor's approval; hid their feelings of uncertainty; became defensive under scrutiny.

Schon comments that the concentration on constellations of meanings, feelings and reasonings had surfaced a dilemma about authenticity and control – how *are* genuine feelings to be dealt with in a model that stresses rationality – not in the Model I sense of cool reason which minimises emotional behaviour, but in the sense of being able to acknowledge and then step aside from one's own feelings, to go quickly to "third position" with them? He doesn't actually resolve that particular dilemma, but makes the comment instead that, "a predisposition toward rationality, reflectivity, and cognitive risk-taking seems essential for students and coaches alike when a practicum takes the form of action research in a learning/coaching process" (Schon, 1987, p295).

Finding some limits

At which point, having previously declared her admiration for Schon's writing, the writer feels bound to say that she was extremely disappointed. In reviewing literature, particularly literature which has powerfully affected one's own praxis, it's as well to put one's biases on the table. This writer was aware, in reading that part of Schon's work and subsequently, in reading all of Argyris' published work of a profound feeling of discontent, despite finding the logic of the work very compelling.

One of this writer's own post-graduate students has expressed one aspect of this reaction very aptly:

> Argyris' (1990) treatment of defences is generally at fault... (his) analysis of organisational defences, especially those which become routine defences and involve skilled incompetence, holds an underlying assumption that the defence

> needs to be rectified. This is reflected in the language he uses ... the tone is one of regarding defences as negatives, to be corrected or stripped away (Percy, 1993, p17).

She remarks:

> If defensiveness could always be dealt with so simply, many management consultants and psychologists would be out of work. Defences, by their very nature, are defending what is fragile and easily broken. Defences are a protection even given a genuine commitment to learning. They are not easily detected or owned, either by teams or by individuals. Defences shield the blind spots, the exposure of which is painful and so defended and avoided. Gestalt therapist, Jorge Rosner, taught the importance of "honouring defences" since defences exist for a purpose and that purpose is to be respected (as distinct from the defence itself). The purpose of the defence needs to be understood. This is in contrast to Senge's approach, to treat defences as a signal to weed out why learning is not occurring (Percy, 1993, pp16-17).

Percy was reacting to Senge's remark that:

> defensive routines can become a surprising ally toward building a learning team by providing a signal when learning is not occurring. Most of us know when we are being defensive, even if we cannot fully identify the source or pattern of our defensiveness (Senge, 1990, p256).

The writer can identify with Percy's reaction. Her own sense was that the literature is somewhat "brisk" about the business of double-loop learning and third position reflection – that somehow, these are described as just another job of work that can be done provided people remain calm and rational, and able to engage in "cognitive risk-taking". That ability, it seems to this writer, is precisely what is at issue here. That it is a highly valuable skill is not in question, nor is the fact that is urgently needed. What is in question is what it takes for "ordinary" people to engage in this sort of activity – either individually or collectively.

Her own professional need was – and is – to find ways to create the kind of reflective dialogue in which individuals have the greatest possible chance to engage in an

examination of themselves from "third position" and to experiment with double-loop learning. Sometimes – in the writer's practice – that dialogue occupies an hour, sometimes it goes on at intervals over weeks, months, even – in some cases – years. The writer has had the experience of observing others – and trying herself – to work with the techniques described by Senge, Argyris, Schon and others. She knows, from years of personal experience and observation, that these things are extremely difficult to do, for all the reasons described previously under the headings "The emotional cost of learning" and "The words to say it".

And, as someone trained in the field of counselling psychology, she found herself wondering – despite his apparent admiration for at least some aspects of Rogers' practice, whether Schon – or Argyris, for that matter – had ever explicitly introduced into their practice the concepts of listening, suspended judgement, and personal availability, empathy and openness that so characterise the writings – and by all accounts – the practice of Carl Rogers, or Robert Carkhuff (1960) or Gerard Egan (1988) or any of the other great thinkers and practitioners in the field of helping and human relations.

At no point, that this writer was able to detect, in any of Argyris' books, in *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schon), in *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge), or in the literature that she reviewed on organisational learning was there any guidance or commentary on how these qualities might be helpful in using the techniques they describe. Yet, as Chapter 4 suggests, the most fundamental tenet in this writer's practice is that a failure to listen actively and deeply is at the basis of every dysfunctional or incomplete piece of human dialogue, including that involved in reflection. She found it inconceivable that this would not be important in the kind of dialogue required in the age of discontinuity. And she had great difficulty in believing that this skill is so widely understood and practised that it could be safely taken for granted that every adult knows how to do it, and does it well.

Certainly, there are some writers who do at least acknowledge the importance of these sorts of skills, even though they don't offer much insight into *how* they are used or developed. For example, McGill et al (1992), whose account of large-scale organisational generative learning also was quoted earlier, identified *empathy* as one of the key learning capabilities.

> Managers in learning organisations must be sensitive and concerned for human nature, and be interested in (and capable of) repairing strained relationships... There is no more convincing evidence of empathy than the motivation and means to repair relationships, and no quality more important for learning (McGill et al, 1992, p15).

Martin (1993, p85) comments that, "the key ... is to structure the course of strategic debate in a way that takes into account the dignity and defences of people facing hard choices."

And in fairness to Senge, his treatment of team learning does include references to – though not descriptions of – the importance of suspending assumptions, listening deeply to each other and creating operational trust.

But Edgar Schein (1993), in his commentary on the kind of dialogue required for organisational learning, goes so far as to say that active listening has only a limited role to play in that dialogue. He comments:

> In the typical sensitivity training workshop, we explore relationships through "opening up" and sharing, through giving and receiving feedback, and through examining all of the *emotional* (italics his) problems of communication. In dialogue, however, we explore all the complexities of *thinking and language*. We discover how arbitrary our basic categories of thought and perception are, and, thereby, become conscious of imperfections or bias in our basic *cognitive* processes (Schein, 1993, p43).

This writer found Schein's comments very illuminating, in that he identifies "active

listening" with emotional work and "dialogue" with cognitive work; and in that he appears to believe that cognitive work can proceed independently of emotional involvement.

The perspective so clearly stated by Schein would seem, for this writer, to be implicit in the literature more generally. Although she did not read this comment until relatively late in her thesis work (it was not written until 1993), it explained why she had been disappointed with the organisational learning literature and why, eventually she returned to the counselling literature for guidance in the development of her practice. Her "retreat" to or revisiting of that literature was not solely triggered by her reaction to the learning literature. As mentioned already. she had been trained as a counselling psychologist and knew – she thought – about the qualities of listening, and other characteristics of effective helping behaviour. She thought she had assimilated them into her practice. But she had experiences – to be recounted in the next part of this thesis – that demonstrated to her that her "knowing-in-action" was vastly inferior to her "head knowledge". Her way of dealing with this was to attend – as regularly as possible – to the development of her practice, coupled with a "refresher course" in some of the literature that had once been so familiar.

She went to that literature with purpose. One purpose was to seek guidance to develop her helping – and particularly her listening – skills, because she believed them to be fundamental to her effectiveness in facilitating deep levels of reflection and learning (her own and others'). A second was to help resolve a debate that the learning literature had started in her thinking and practice – the balance in reflective learning between what Casey (1987) has called "love" and "truth", and what Schein would probably call "emotional" and "cognitive" work.

Casey is worth quoting at length:

> Suffering and learning

> It is a very old question. Is suffering necessary for learning? I have come to believe that suffering is sometimes necessary and sometimes not. In twelve action learning sets of five or six executives at Ashridge Management College over the past five years, I have watched half a dozen chief executives reach new heights of learning (for them) by crawling painfully through the most daunting jungle of pain and misery. On the other hand, in exactly the same setting I have seen an equal number of chief executives achieve what appeared to be equally significant learning for them, with no real effort – carried along on a light stream of joy and enlightenment, revelling in the sheer delight of their new insights. Learning is sometimes agony and learning is sometimes fun. Is it possible to identify which kind of learning demands suffering and which kind can be fun?
>
> In my teens and twenties I was fortunate to experience at first hand two well tried systems of education – I was at school with the Jesuits and my first job was teaching with the Benedictines for three years. Here are two validated approaches to education, both ancient in their pedigree and accepted across Europe over several centuries. At school I learned through suffering -
>
> To give and not to count the cost,
> To fight and not to heed the wounds,
> To toil and not to seek for rest,
> To labour and to ask for no reward...
>
> Ignatius Loyola founded the Jesuits in 1534 and the grammar school I attended based its education firmly on the principles he established more than 400 years ago, and in its way it worked. There are penalties of course (as with any system) – for example, the weight of guilt and self-denial which all graduates of the Jesuit system carry around for life. But also implanted for life are the joys of intellectual exercise, the springboard of self-discipline, the stimulus of competition, the urge to self-reliance.
>
> Four years later I found myself appointed as a schoolmaster in a Benedictine school. Benedict and Ignatius were poles apart in their thinking about education. Benedict believed in the power of love – not just as we all believe in love – his trust in the power of love was so rock-steady and universal that in his school no place was found for heavy discipline, no corner for punishment, no coercive external force (other than love) was allowed to impinge on the young people being educated.
>
> If survival is any test of a system, then these two diametrically opposed systems of education are both successful – they survive side-by-side today; you can send your son to Stonyhurst ort Ampleforth, exposing him to two very different sets of assumptions regarding what will help him to learn. In one system the assumption is that learning is a relentless fight against our sinful propensity to indolence, in the other system the assumption is that learning is enabled only in an atmosphere of love. McGregor's X and Y come pretty close (Casey, 1987, pp30-31).

He continues:

The Conspiracy of Love with Truth

> So, was Ignatius right or was Benedict right? In a strange way they were both right. Unless the atmosphere is one of trust and love, the chance for self-understanding would never arise, so sets of chief executives need a set adviser able to develop a "Benedictine" environment. But unless the set adviser is also Jesuitical enough to hold on to his belief that the only way to help at the moment of truth is to push the learner through the shell of his own pain, no amount of supportive understanding will really do the trick. This conspiracy of love with truth is a formidable alliance and a potent source of help.
>
> At this stage my conclusion is that (at least in chief executive sets) set advisers not only have the right to abandon process work from time to time and engage in personal therapy; they have the obligation to do so. Because if they do not, nobody else will.
>
> Over the past ten years I have argued that the set adviser's role should be concerned more with group processes than with person-to-person consultancy. I still believe that. What I have learned from my work at Ashridge – and I thank Ashridge for it – is that to be dogmatic about excluding personal consultancy as one part of the set adviser's repertoire is wrong. As with any other skill used by the set adviser, it is simply a question of choosing when to use it (Casey, 1987, p37).

Casey uses the word "love" and a colleague had used a similar word to describe what she did when working with students in learning situations. "You have to love them," she said. This writer knew what she meant – that there is a sense in which it is impossible to work effectively with someone if, in some part of the mind or heart, the helper is judging what is being said or the person saying it. Rogers (1961) called this unconditional positive regard, and it was to Rogers that this writer first turned, seeking some balance to what she perceived to be a gap in the current organisational learning literature. She came out of that excursion – and the journey of practical experience described in the next chapter – with an understanding and a set of techniques which are described in Chapters 5 and 6.

A brief summary of the writer's major learning from this literature

Hopefully, this chapter has not only reviewed some of the literature relevant to the role

of reflection in learning and how it works, but has also revealed how that literature stimulated the present writer's thinking and practice, To summarise the key points around which her own learning focussed, these were:

- The global, organisational and individual significance, in the age of discontinuity, of being able to reflect upon self in the deepest possible ways, even to the extent of re-invention of self through generative, double-loop learning;

- the suggestion that reflection needs to be a process which brings thinking and action close together, that it is something which transcends organisational structures and that it incorporates holistic and intuitive thinking, as well as fact-based logic;

- the andrological theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1984) that emphasises the processes of mutual inquiry and reflection in adult learning;

- the barriers presented by cognitive and emotional "personal scripts" to "critical subjectivity": how "surfacing mental models" (Senge, 1990) constructively opens up new options for personal practice;

- the challenge of working in areas of uncertainty, uniqueness and confusion, in the indeterminate zones of practice;

- Schon's (1987) concept of "artistry": a kind of knowing which is "knowing-in-action" and which can be enhanced by "reflection-in-action";

- Nonaka's (1991) challenge that we make explicit what is tacitly known, and the power of metaphor in doing this;

- the necessity, as Casey (1987) represents it, of accepting the necessity to work in both the emotional and cognitive domains of learning and reflection.

Chapter 4: The development of theory in practice: an account of action learning experience

Introduction

In Chapter 1, the writer described why she was interested in systematically developing her praxis – that is, integrating her personal theory and practice. In brief, the reasons were:

- to acknowledge and clearly articulate why the practitioner does what she does – what drives her to select one technique rather than another in facilitating the development of others;

- to undertake a systematic examination of the gap between the theory or idea which is espoused by the practitioner and the theory-in-use – the actual behaviour which she practises (Argyris & Schon, 1978), with a view to increasing the congruence between the two;

- to throw light on experience which is confusing and on problems which don't seem to have obvious answers and produce what Argyris and Schon (1978) have called "dilemmas of effectiveness";

- to develop practical guides for action, to develop helpful cues to oneself, particularly in difficult situations, that might offer sign posts or at least options as to what to do next;

- to be able to offer something which would be helpful in guiding others who want to do similar things;

- to use experience and practice to refine the practitioner's understanding and personal theory, and to use theory and understanding – her own and other people's – to inform and enrich her practice.

In this study, the practitioner-researcher is the subject of her own research, and has had to try to retain a "critical subjectivity" (Reason, 1988, p12), as she tells and reflects upon the story of the development of one part of her praxis. She offers, in effect, a case-study in the application of self-reflective techniques.

The development of the whole praxis of one individual would be a very big field for study. In the case of the present writer, the development of praxis over the past seven years has included the development of an overall approach to consulting, as well as the development of a whole suite of consulting skills which includes management development, facilitation and conflict resolution skills, counselling, strategic planning, performance management and appraisal.

For the purpose of this study, she focussed on one particular part of her praxis (see below) – albeit one which was – and remains – fundamental to her whole consultancy capability and her capacity to keep developing that capability through learning. It was that part of her praxis concerned with the issues raised in Chapter 1:

- How does reflection help us to learn, or to help others to learn?

- What does reflection consist of? What helps and hinders us in the act of reflection?

- In particular, what are the ingredients in the kind of reflection associated with double-loop learning and third position learning?

- How does reflection help us to develop our understanding of ourselves in ways that help us to learn?

- How do our tacit or implicit "theories" about ourselves guide our behaviour, and does it help to make implicit theories (Argyris & Schon, 1978) explicit?

- How can the practitioner – the educator or facilitator of learning in others – use reflection to understand and develop his or her own practice, with its suite of acknowledged and unacknowledged "theories", and to effectively integrate those themes with practice?

- and how does the researcher tap into, make use of, test and perhaps refine the stock of existing theory and knowledge?

This set of questions, set out in this particular order, more or less matches the sequential development of these ideas in the mind of this writer. It is not a perfect match, because understanding – in this case at any rate – did not progress in "neat" order and there were times when thinking was going on, in parallel, across almost all the issues at once. These were times of "overload" that produced anxiety, excitement and ultimately – insight.

As discussed toward the end of Chapter 2, the writer has chosen to present the data of her experience in the form of a story or narrative, hopefully told in such a manner as to surface the way in which the praxis was developed "in practice". It is intended to reveal both the inner and the outer journey, so that the writer's understanding and invention of herself is as explicit as possible.

The story is divided into two major parts. The first part is primarily the story of the "unplanned experience". The second part is sub-divided into four separate "short"

stories, each one relating the co-operative inquiry and practice entered into with four colleagues. These short stories have been separated out so that they can be told more completely, without "holding up" the development of the rest of the narrative. The writer had a sense that each one was a story in its own right, deserving of being told decently and in order.

In the earlier description of the methodology (Chapter 2) these were categorised as "planned" activities, but the qualification put on that in Chapter 2 needs to be repeated here: there is no way that I could have planned the rich and continuing experience that these people have so generously offered to me.

As a final introductory comment, the writer must point out that she was, in parts of her praxis, "re-invented" by the production of the narrative; that the person who had these experiences has been overlaid, in understanding, by the person who has written about them in her diaries and then in successive drafts of this thesis. Story-telling is an ancient art but its rejuvenating and enriching character remains undiminished.

For the rest of this chapter the personal pronoun is used. As a device for writing, this sets aside the comfortable illusion of objectivity – the experiences are very much the product of a particular person, on a particular journey. However, in using "I", the writer is constantly reminded of the limitations of the individual experience and encouraged to reframe it by asking: "What else could be made of this? Would others have seen it differently or produced different data?"

A brief introduction to the writer

Since this is an account of part of an individual's development over a number of years, it is perhaps helpful to say a little bit about my background since my whole history has undoubtedly shaped my thinking, not just the part of the personal history documented

here.

My professional experience, at the time of writing, includes twenty five years in the fields of occupational psychology, management, consultancy and teaching. My earliest training, as an occupational psychologist in the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) prepared me for counselling, research and organisational analysis using the norms and models of my discipline. These were later extended and reinforced when I undertook a course work Master's degree in Occupational Psychology at Melbourne University in the mid-1970's. I eventually became Chief Psychologist, responsible for a national service of psychologists. The role included not only day-to-day line management, but intellectual leadership, policy development and the management of a complex interface with the rest of the CES and with external bodies.

After ten years in the CES, I took on a consultancy job with the Victorian Public Service Board. This was a complete change and was like "beginning all over again". I was one of an inter-disciplinary team of ten people and for the first time, in any serious and rigorous way, my own understanding of the world, with its psychological orientation, was challenged by that of accountants, economists, management specialists, philosophers, educationalists, engineers, town-planners, lawyers, scientists – and politicians. It felt like undertaking a "crash MBA" in eighteen months.

I emerged from this experience thinking of myself as a generalist, and for quite a few years found little nourishment or excitement in revisiting – or even following – the psychological literature and community.

Four years of consultancy work – in a competitive and challenging environment – had prepared me for another spell of management. In 1982 I moved to Australia Post and spent five years in senior human resource management roles. These jobs combined the development and implementation of strategy – in a very large organisation – with the

executive management of large numbers of people. For the first time, I identified with and became a member of the senior executive group in a large enterprise with a business orientation.

I spent over five years with Australia Post and then, after a short stint with a commercial consulting firm, established my own consultancy practice, covering management development, organisation change, performance management, group facilitation and individual counselling. This practice has been a major part of my professional life for the past seven years (at the time of writing).

For the past twelve years, I have also taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in psychology and management at tertiary institutions in Victoria. From its establishment in 1990 until early 1994, I directed the Master of Business in Management/Organisational Change and Development at RMIT.

Part A: The story of the "unplanned experience"

Introduction

The story of the unplanned experiences follows this sequence:

- my earliest efforts at helping people to make sense of their experiences and guide their actions, which were focussed on what's going on "out there in the world";

- the impact on me of the collegiate group at RMIT who were focussed on self-managed learning; the value of exploring what's going on "inside the person"; and the importance of listening skills in facilitating that exploration;

- my learning about the importance – for both the facilitator and the person being worked with – of being able to cope with the ambiguity and uncertainty that can accompany that inward exploration, when the facilitator relinquishes the role of "expert";

- the learning that I had to do about how to learn from experience by reflecting upon it;

- my efforts at putting these ideas into practice;

- my eventual grasp of the value of story-telling as a means of enhancing reflection on experience;

- my attempt to be "critically subjective" through the use of diary work;

- a specific example of the use of diary work to surface one of my own personal scripts;

- my efforts at reflection-in-the-midst-of-action, and the internal dialogue which accompanies it.

Early efforts

When I began to consult and teach full-time (about 12 months before the commencement of this research), I "followed my nose". I had a range of theoretical models which I used fairly rigorously – or so I thought. I offered my students and my clients – and myself – the comfort that comes from having frameworks which seem to shed light on what is going on and offer some guide to action.

For example, I would offer a model like "systems thinking" (Richardson, 1990) to encourage a client to think broadly about the nature of organisational issues, to see the inter-connectedness of seemingly different phenomena and to highlight the possible – and unexpected – consequences of well-meaning interventions; or perhaps a framework for managing organisational change, like that of Gerard Egan (1988), which systematically itemises the questions to be asked and the issues to be explored.

Without acknowledging it, I was assuming that if people could make sense of issues and experiences, and think systematically and rigorously about them, they could master them. I assumed that a good "head" understanding would be sufficient to explain and guide action. In thinking that way, I was following a practice perfected by the ancient Greeks in application of reason to understanding the nature of the human condition.

I even used a technique which – while lacking his finesse! – probably owes something to Socrates. This consisted of asking people a series of questions which were implicitly designed to draw them to a particular conclusion. Instead of offering them a proposition and asking: "Do you agree with this?" or telling them to apply it, I would encourage them to find the answer for themselves. The point being that I wanted it to be my answer, or a cousin of it.

Most people did not challenge the use of this technique, and it was only on a couple of occasions that someone actually said: "This is frustrating because you only want one answer." I think that I was quite good at listening to – and acknowledging – the answers I didn't want to hear, but I wouldn't stop the process until I got the one I really wanted.

I used these techniques not because the ancient Greeks did it that way, but because it seemed to me to be the obvious way to help people. My own preferred way of dealing

with experiences and issues is by thinking systematically about them and by quickly formulating a series of conclusions or judgements which enable me to take prompt action. In the framework of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1962), I am an extroverted thinker – one who needs dialogue with others to stimulate thinking and sense-making. I knew nothing of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator at the time I am writing of, but I was certainly acting "true to type". And my assumption, at the time, unacknowledged and implicit, was that everyone was like me.

Contact with competencies, action learning and self-managed learning

In taking up the appointment at RMIT (the year in which I began my doctoral work), I encountered a set of ideas and experiences which began to change – quite profoundly – my understanding of what I was doing.

The Department of Management, within the Faculty of Business, had re-shaped its Graduate Diploma in Management. Prideaux and Ford (1988) have given a very complete account of the Department's work in this respect. To use their own words:

> An innovative management development program, involving the support of a background team of fellow workers and the input of a staff member "Consultant", has been created by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and is based around key adult learning principles. These include: emphasis on management competencies, self-management in learning, group-based learning, work experience based training, and relevant career planning (Prideaux & Ford, 1988, p56).

I was very excited by their thinking. The team shared the view expressed much earlier by Mintzberg (1973) that many management schools give students MBA and MPA degrees but do not in fact teach them to manage. Their concern, repeated by various writers in the years since (for example, Simms & Sauser, 1985), was that traditional management education programs did not develop the skills actually required for effective management, concentrating on learning *about* management, but neglecting

learning *how* to manage.

As a result, the RMIT team had become interested to explore not only the knowledge and techniques needed to manage (such as the tools of corporate planning, financial analysis and marketing strategy), but the *competencies* needed for effective managerial performance. I have since worked on my own definition of competencies (Cherry & KcKinnon, 1992) and would describe them now as any combination of skills, personal qualities or attributes which enable a person to sustain effective performance in a particular role. At the time when the RMIT group started working in the field, they drew heavily – though not exclusively – on the work of Boyatzis (1982) – who had examined the management competencies of 2000 American managers and who defined a competency as *an underlying characteristic of a manager causally related to superior performance in a management position* (Boyatzis, 1982).

Boyatzis' study identified eighteen competencies which included such things as proactivity, being concerned with impact, spontaneity, accurate self-assessment, self-control, stamina and adaptability.

As Prideaux (1986) has observed, these were skills and qualities frequently neglected in traditional management education, but potentially the key factors underpinning effective management performance. My interest was immediately caught – could it be that knowledge of models and techniques and the application of reason and logic was not enough?

The reader might well be asking at this point – hadn't fifteen years of practice and six years of study in the field of occupational psychology revealed that to you already? The answer is no, it hadn't.

I knew that when human beings are not performing effectively at work – or in any

given area of their life – then someone has to look "within the person" for the reason – not only at their skills, but at things like their capacity to monitor the impact of their behaviour on others, and at their level of self-confidence.

I had used the skills of the counsellor – active listening, encouragement and empathy (Rogers, 1961) – to help people explore things that were troubling them and blocking performance. In this way, I had – if the Rogerian model is to be believed – helped to build self-esteem and the confidence to go on, but at the end of the day, when the client's or student's heart was lightened and head was clearer, I offered the solutions I knew best – the solutions of logical analysis and pragmatic "common sense". "Just think it through carefully, using this or that model, and take the best available option which that analysis suggests," would be the essence of my advice.

I had studied the landmark contributions of Robert Carkhuff (1969) who had suggested that counsellors should try to share with their clients their own skills – that if one wants to help a person to function more effectively then that person should be trained to actively listen as well as being "actively listened to". Carkhuff's "teaching as a preferred way of helping" and his carefully researched analysis of the skills of effective counselling are to the theory and practice of counselling what Boyatzis is to the field of management development.

Despite years of exposure to that sort of thinking, I did not make the leap of applying it to my own practice as a management educator and consultant. And – like the schools of management education criticised by Mintzberg (1973) – I had not made the leap to thinking that those things should be systematically identified, described and "taught" as part of the process of developing managers. My only consolation – based on subsequent examination of the organisational learning literature – is that I was probably in good company.

There were other attractions for me in the work being done at the RMIT. They were interested in *self-managed* learning – the notion that management development is enhanced when managers themselves take responsibility for diagnosing their own learning needs, choosing ways of meeting these needs and managing the implementation of their development plans. To quote Prideaux again:

> Self-managed approaches to management development appear to achieve strong involvement in learning and high energy directed towards achievement. Intuitively we know that this is the case, but usually management development programs are not designed to release this dynamic. Often the manager is the passive, and sometimes reluctant, recipient of something planned and implemented by someone else (Prideaux, 1986, p46).

The distinction between teaching which is teacher-directed learning (pedagogy) and self-directed learning (andragogy) has been clearly made by Knowles (1978). The concept of andragogy was described in the previous chapter. Where the learner is self-directed, the teacher's role is that of helper, consultant or facilitator, who assists the process of development by the development of "appropriate learning environments and processes" (Prideaux, 1986, p46).

Just what it means in practice to create an appropriate environment and provide appropriate processes became for me the subject of a long search – one which is continuing and which has become the subject of this thesis.

I could embrace the concept of self-managed learning quite readily. After years of giving "expert" advice as a consultant and manager, and accepting fully the responsibility for finding and "selling" the "right" answers to clients, staff and other stakeholders, it was both a relief and a challenge to learn a "new" way.

Again, there was a keen sense of revisiting what I already "knew". The "client-centred" approach to counselling (Rogers, 1961) rejects the notion of counsellor as expert who knows the answers and tells the client what to do. I "knew" that this was

okay in a counselling session and to the extent that I could – before logic and the need to give advice took over – I had tried to do that in counselling sessions. For some reason, I had not made the connection to the craft of management development.

When I first asked myself why I hadn't made the connection, I was disgusted with myself. Why had I missed something so obvious? Why had I neglected the early lessons which came from my professional preparation and development as a psychologist? The first and easiest answer was that I had worked for a number of years with individuals and organisations which either did not value the models of counselling and helping which I had acquired or could not see their relevance to the tasks on hand. I spoke earlier of being "in competition" with other disciplines during my time at the Public Service Board and commented that I didn't turn to psychology as a source of learning or understanding for several years. In fact, in the rush to understand and assimilate the ideas of others, and to prove myself in a tougher and more complex environment, I let go of my earlier frameworks and in some sense, threw the baby out with the bath water.

I should add that through all the years I worked with the CES and the Public Service Board, I didn't consciously or objectively think of myself as developing a personal praxis. At the CES, I tried – conscientiously! – to understand the demands, principles and concepts offered by my discipline. But they belonged to the discipline, not to me, like a coat I had bought off-the-peg rather than tailoring it for myself.

During the years with the Public Service Board, at times I was like a child in a shop, both entranced and overwhelmed by new toys, picking things off the shelf, experimenting with them and trying to understand them. At other times, I was like a reluctant army recruit, frightened by the tasks, over-awed by the skill of my colleagues and desperately trying to keep up with the rest of the troop. Very rarely did I feel that I offered anything approaching intellectual leadership to those with whom I worked.

So it is easy to say that I was simply "distracted" from my original discipline of psychology, and on a steep curve of exploration and learning about new ones.

Learning to live with uncertainty and ambiguity

Looking back, I think that something else was going on as well, It seems to me now that the attraction of the new "toys" lay in their seeming ability to provide answers to important questions being asked by clients, by stakeholders, by my colleagues and my superiors, and by me. The questions had to do with organisations' mission statements, values, strategies, systems, staffing, structures and practices. What should this particular organisation make its priority for the next three years? How should it organise itself to do that? What sort of policies and procedures would be needed? What sort of people? Where would such people be found? And so on. All of these were significant questions requiring urgent answers – and were being asked of a group of consultants who were seen as being able to provide "expert answers". It strikes me now, although it didn't at the time, that it would have required a very determined practitioner to use Rogerian client-centred methods to get answers to those questions – to say to clients: "The process we use is as important as the answers we get. Let's collect your wisdom and do this together." The method preferred by – and actually commissioned by the Public Service Board and its clients – was one that I would call "black boxing" – an independent expert analyst comes in, collects data, goes away and interprets it, and produces an answer.

To operate in a different way would be to take more time, to allow clients to develop their own views and understanding and encourage them to debate and resolve differences themselves. I believe that it would also require them – and the consultant, and all the other stakeholders – to live with uncertainty and ambiguity while those processes run their course.

The uncertainty for all parties that can be created when a consultant – or a teacher – asks questions instead of giving "expert" answers, can be a major challenge for all those involved. To live with ambiguity, paradox, conflict, or the unknown is something which some people may be better suited to than others, in terms of temperament or preference (Myers, 1962). For those who are not particularly tolerant of it, the result might well be anxiety – and even fear – and it might take considerable will-power and skill to engage in a process which demands it. For everyone, regardless of their tolerance of uncertainty per se, it might also be important for them to trust the processes being used to find answers and to trust the other people engaged in them, When both certainty and trust are missing, the response might be one of defensiveness and avoidance (Argyris, 1985). One obvious means of defence is to remove the uncertainty – and attendant anxiety – by finding an outside expert who, hopefully, can be trusted by most people.

The acknowledgment and management of uncertainty and anxiety is a theme which will recur in the rest of this chapter. When adults are invited to self-manage their own learning, I believe that anxieties are immediately presented for those who engage in learning and those who try to assist them while they do it.

Again, with the wisdom of hindsight, I would now label these reactions as being reinforced – at the time – by powerful organisational scripts, which discouraged any *admission* of uncertainty, with attendant "self-sealing" defensive routines (Argyris, 1991). What is more disconcerting to me is that one of my own personal scripts – that one that says it's important to be competent at all times – powerfully colluded with the context in which I worked.

Learning how reflection helps us to learn from experience

Another reason for being attracted to the work of the team at the RMIT was the emphasis on experience as a source of learning. Davies and Easterby-Smith (1984) are among those who have established that when managers are asked to recall events which have particularly contributed to their development, they usually describe situations which have occurred at work. They mention things like special assignments, particularly challenging tasks, things that went wrong but which taught them important lessons, and being "thrown in at the deep end". This is a question which I routinely ask both students and clients, both individually and in groups. At a guess, I must have asked it 300-400 times in the last five years. My own experience corresponds exactly with that of Davies and Easterby-Smith. And as they found, the number of formal courses mentioned by managers as having been significant in their development tends to be low.

One conclusion which can be drawn from this finding is that it would be a good thing to locate management learning as much as possible in the work situation. It can be argued (Prideaux, 1986) that when this happens, the problem of "transfer of training" can be largely solved. This is the problem of ensuring that people who attend training programs actually apply what they have learned back at work.

One of the most significant and innovative ways in which management educators have tried to develop learning based on work experience is through the action learning approach developed by Revans (1980). Some of the principles contained in Revans' thinking were described in earlier chapters. What those principles mean for the practice of management development, in summary, is to invite a manager to spend a number of months working on a new project or task, perhaps in a part of the organisation unfamiliar to that person, or in a different position. Another – related – approach is the problem-oriented process suggested by Bowden (1986) which builds

the content of a management development program on the real issues and problems facing the organisation and the managers in it.

The key to experience-based learning is that the individual is asked to access direct personal experience and practice in "real life" situations, as compared with reading about other people's experience and ideas, or simply thinking about ideas in a training situation. The role of the management educator is to facilitate ways in which people can create, access and reflect upon their experience. As described in Chapter 2, Kolb's (1984) learning cycle described the processes involved for the learner – of collecting data through experience, trying to make sense of the data, developing an idea or conclusion which can be tested through further experience and the engaging of iterative cycles of reflecting, concluding and experiencing. It is very similar to the action research cycle contained in the Methodology Chapter (Figure 1, Chapter 2).

Although attracted to the idea of accessing and enriching the experience and wisdom of the learner in this way, I had very little idea how to do it. Two of the methods used by the RMIT group were contract learning and something called "critical incident analysis", both of which are also described in Chapter 2.

I was not particularly attracted to or excited by the principle of group-based learning which was valued by the RMIT team. In practice, it meant the formation of participants into Professional Development Teams (PDTs), each PDT consisting of five or six participants with access to a member of staff referred to as a Consultant. The intention is that participants in the Graduate Diploma of Management use the team as a support, resource, sounding board and catalyst as they explore their development needs and evolve their learning contracts. At the completion of the contract, the PDT assists the individual to evaluate the learning which has taken place.

The staff member's role is described as that of "consultant" and not lecturer or group

leader. Similarly, the term "participant" is used rather than student. This is a means of affirming the course members' self-management role. The aim is to create independent self-directed actions rather than the dependent behaviour often associated with the traditional teacher-pupil relationship (Prideaux & Ford, 1988, p61).

When I say that I was not particularly attracted or excited by the idea of group-based learning, I mean that I both took it for granted (I was used to working in teams) and, I think now, I completely underestimated the skill involved in systematic and sustained team-based learning. The PDTs had a "compulsory" life of two years and participants could not change groups without great difficulty and personal effort. At that time, when I had no experience of team-based learning as I now understand it, I had no idea of what was involved in terms of skill and commitment. Now that I do, I regard it as an immense challenge, whether the team-learning lasts for hours or days or years.

Putting theories into practice

As well as working with the RMIT team, I was establishing my own consulting practice. One of my first assignments included a large contract to provide management development for senior managers (including executives) for one of Australia's best known and biggest banks. The contract extended over eighteen months and involved offering a two-day program to fifteen different groups of managers. My brief was to develop their skills in managing difficult performance problems – that is, situations where an individual's performance at work was not satisfactory and attempts at changing that situation didn't seem to have much effect.

This seemed to be a wonderful opportunity to apply the principles used so effectively by the RMIT team. I designed a program full of opportunities for managers to identify and analyse "critical incidents", to reflect on and talk about their experiences in tackling difficult performance issues, and to plan constructive and practical measures

for trying again. Since it seemed important to access their experience and wisdom, rather than "teaching" them mine, I kept my input to a minimum and proceeded down the path of self-discovery and self-managed learning.

I had tried these methods with other groups – usually more junior ones and in a variety or topic or content areas, including customer service training, career planning and the development of communication skills. I considered myself well placed to do the same thing with senior managers in a bank.

To say that I failed miserably was an understatement. The response of the first two or three groups was so overwhelmingly negative that I was lucky to retain the contract. I should qualify that statement by saying that within each group, there were a handful of people (four or five) who responded well to the process I used, but the majority (the other fifteen or so) were not keen to cooperate or engage in the process (at least, not overtly; I don't know what they were thinking privately).

It may be helpful to describe some examples of their reactions. When asked to think about a time they had found it difficult to get the desired change in performance, it was not uncommon for most of the group to say they couldn't think of a single time in their recent – that is, senior – experience as managers when they were not able to effect change of that kind. When asked to access their experience in this way, they claimed not to have any that was relevant. "I wouldn't have got this job if I couldn't manage things like that," was the usual comment. When I asked them to describe the methods they used to change other people's behaviour and performance, they replied: "I used my common sense, you don't need a theory or a technique out of a book. You just do what a situation requires."

I was at first surprised then dismayed and finally very frustrated at these sorts of answers. Why had I been given the brief, if all these people were so good at this

already? And why couldn't they even begin to describe the methods they used – surely they must have some words to share their experience and understanding of what they were doing?

Persistent efforts to get them to find the words, to talk to each other if not to me, or to write things down instead of saying them, seemed not to help. If anything, it sometimes made things worse. "You are supposed to be telling us what to do. You're supposed to be the expert," was a common response. As noted in the previous chapter, Knowles (1984) would have recognised in this the cry, "teach me!"

When I spoke to a colleague – also a self-employed consultant – about my experience, he told me that I had made a serious mistake. "Senior managers in a competitive corporate environment will never admit – in front of peers and colleagues – to not being able to do things. You should never have asked them to reflect on things they can't do or find difficult to do. That's okay for junior staff, who aren't expected to know everything, and maybe don't care if they do or not, but it's not the right thing to do with senior people like this."

I felt humiliated and naive – "How very like a psychologist I am, after all, expecting people to want to share their experience and talk about themselves," I remember thinking. I was also very puzzled as to why the principles – which seemed so attractive when spoken about by the RMIT team and read about in the articles and books to which they had referred me – didn't seem to work in practice, at least not with a group of skilled managers. In retrospect, I was experiencing first hand those barriers to learning – and reflection – which were described in the previous chapter.

Over the time of the contract, I worked with 300 managers – a fair sample (in fact, about two thirds) of all managers in the bank at what I have described as senior, but not executive, level. By executive level, I mean the top 30 or 40 positions in the bank.

The senior management group (immediately below that level) at that time consisted of about 450 people. The middle level management positions were at least double that and possibly much greater again.

The group with which I worked included managers from all over Australia, from South-east asia, North America, Europe, the United Kingdom and the Pacific Region. Although I had considerably modified my technique by the time I had finished, I still invited people to reflect on their experiences and the response patterns – at least the ones people made initially – remained very consistent – a great deal of denial that anyone at that level would have a problem and a persistent difficulty in describing what they actually did to manage the performance of individuals.

I said that I modified my technique. I was still interested to focus on their experience and wisdom, not mine, because I wanted them to experience any limitations in what they were currently doing and use that as the starting point for change. I had accessed my common sense and decided that "when we are on a good thing, we generally stick to it" (like the popular advertisement for fly spray in Australia once suggested). If what we are doing seems to work, then there is no great incentive to change, especially if one is a busy manager with little time for experimentation just for the sake of it. The incentive for change, it seemed to me, would generally come if we had a problem or difficulty that current methods were not able to deal with effectively.

I also wanted them to reflect on what they *thought* they were doing – that was the point of my questions: "How do you manage to turn around poor performance? *What* do you do? *Why* do you do it?" My reasoning was that people generally do things for a reason – they take action of one kind because they believe or hope that it will produce some kind of effect. If these managers could articulate what they believed they were doing, and why, maybe it would be easier for them and me to understand why sometimes that behaviour didn't work – perhaps because it was based on a false

assumption or belief about the situation. I was also interested to know if their ideas about how to do things bore much resemblance to the ones which I was able to offer them! I wanted to know how big was the gap – in both understanding and acceptance – that I might be inviting them to cross.

To help these managers to acknowledge that from time to time they did run into performance management problems and that occasionally they got unpleasant and unintended reactions to their well-intended interventions, I had to invent some "games". For example, I would get them to think about when they were starting out as managers, and what they had had to learn in the early days. I asked them to imagine that they were giving advice to more junior managers, and what that advice would be. I asked them to talk about the kind of experience they had in being managed by others, and what worked and what didn't work. I asked them to describe the behaviour of managers they admired for their skill in this area. In essence, I used techniques which "let them off the hook" of directly and deliberately visiting their own immediate ideas and experience ("This is what *I* think." "This is what *I* do." "This is how *I* feel."), and instead got them to start talking about the past, or other people's experience and behaviour.

It seemed to work. After some time talking in this way, I noticed that the group would start gradually – and without noticing it, I suspect – to talk about *now* and *themselves*. Generalities would give way to anecdotes – some of them already known to others members of the group – and to questions: "What do you do with someone like that?" and to advise each other: "Well, here's what I do." It was hard work, in the sense that it required careful "stage management" and some groups took much longer than others, but eventually most people found some way – individually, in pairs, in writing, out loud, with me or with the whole group – to revisit their experiences, identify the challenges and limits to their current way of doing and thinking, and start to think about what they might do differently. The experience with this particular group has

stayed in my mind – as well as in the pages of my journal – for a long time because my initial failure was so public, unexpected (by me), and so hard to fix. Although I had similar experiences, with similar and dissimilar groups, the "bank saga" also stands out for me because the experience continued over a long period of time. It is, however, representative of a series of experiences which both discouraged me and provided me with the incentive to keep trying.

I realised that there was a long distance, for me at least, between the principles of adult learning and their practical application. All sorts of things made the process challenging for me and for the people I was trying to help. Some groups – like the bankers – found it challenging to risk admitting that some things were very difficult, or even "too hard" for them, or that they didn't know what to do. Some people found it hard to take ownership of their own experience and actions – they spoke about the things which were done to them rather than the choices and decisions they had made themselves about how to act, and what to do.

Some people – like me – found it hard to live with uncertainty, when there are no clear or obvious answers – and when our experience instead of suggesting solutions seems only to remind us how complex life – and particularly organisational life – can be. To suspend judgement, to avoid offering my "expert" opinion, to encourage a person or a group to struggle for their own answers when what they wanted was a quick or easy answer from me – these were difficult things for me to do, given the preferences I have in Myers-Briggs terms (Myers, 1962) and given the experiences in consulting which I had had in the past.

However, I had seen and heard enough with the RMIT group to know that I wanted to press on, that I wanted to become better at applying the principles that I mentioned earlier in this chapter: the principle of self-management in learning, experience-based learning, and yes, group-based learning too. I was starting to realise how big a

challenge it is to create groups in which people can learn productively together, particularly when they are managing their own learning and trying to help others to do the same.

This is perhaps an appropriate time to mention that at the height of my frustration with the bankers, I conducted the series of interviews mentioned towards the end of Chapter 2. The net effect of those interviews was to make me re-double my efforts at learning to learn. I couldn't face the prospect of having to arrange for reluctant manager-learners to face life shattering experiences in order to get them into the starting gates!

And over the next year or so, in the context of general consultancy, there were many opportunities to continue to practise these things, and to become increasingly comfortable in moving to the position of "meta-me" to reflect on what I was doing.

Experiencing the power of story-telling as a means of reflection

As mentioned previously, my work at RMIT involved directing the new Master of Business in Management program. This program meant that for about ten per cent of my time I was involved in working directly with students or in administering the program (the latter was quite nominal, given the number of students). The taking up of a formal role with RMIT once again (I had taught part-time a number of semesters in under-graduate and post-graduate classes in psychology and management prior to that, over a period of about seven years) meant that I had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with post-graduate students as well as academic colleagues. I will treat separately some of the specific encounters with these colleagues which profoundly influenced my praxis over the following five years. The focus in this part of the chapter will be on the experiences I had in working with students.

In the previous chapter, I quoted the impact on Schon (1987) and Knowles (1978) of

Rogers' (1969, pp103 and 277) statements about "teaching being a vastly over-rated function." Those statements of Rogers (which were quoted extensively in that chapter), were not ones that I had read at the time, despite having read a lot of Rogers' work. I wish that I had. It took me a great deal of time to come hesitantly and halteringly to the understanding that those words of his express. What I *did* know was that I, like Rogers, had increasingly little wish to "*make* anyone know something" (Rogers, 1969, p103).

My practice, whether working with the whole group or with individual learners in what is known formally as "supervision", was to provide some starting points – sometimes in the form of trigger questions – which would encourage people to reflect upon the experiences which were forming the basis of their own action research projects.

In the first couple of years, these questions were of a general kind, such as:

- What are the critical incidents that stand out for you since we last met?

- What were they about? Who was involved? What was said or done by you and others? What did you think and feel at the time? Later on? What were the consequences or outcomes for you or others?

- If you were to have that experience over again, what would you do differently?

What followed was always an exercise in story-telling – usually by private reflection and writing – in small groups or in the whole group. The "ground rules" were that others in the group would "consult to" the story teller, using skills in listening and inquiry, that would help the teller of the story to make greater sense of the experiences being related.

The skills of individuals in consulting to others varied considerably, but over the course of twelve months, as stories were told and re-told, and as everyone got lots of practice in telling, listening and inquiry, it was rare not to see a considerable shift in the skills of most of the group. What is interesting for my present purpose, however, is the role that I – or other members of the faculty who might be present – took in these proceedings.

I was conscious, at the start of the year, when the group was initially forming, of taking a lead role by explicitly modelling the kind of conversation that might be helpful. This process of modelling was assisted very much when, after the first year, I had developed my thinking about the concept of "personal scripts" described in the previous chapter. I used to offer that concept, and then model, through dialogue with one of the participants, the ways that scripts might be surfaced and helpfully examined. I used to focus on *what* was being surfaced, starting with "easy" or "obvious" examples of scripts which were very self-evident both to their "owner" and to the observers. These "easy examples" were selected in order to make the process non-threatening – even fun! – and then it became a little bit more focussed and a bit more searching. Later in the chapter I will discuss my specific approach to these conversations in more detail, since they are at the core of my own practice in helping to facilitate deeply reflective learning.

The point, for the moment, is that having modelled something which was observed to be helpful and which looked relatively easy, my intention was to begin to establish a climate in which individuals would feel comfortable in working in this way with each other.

And that is largely how it happened, and has continued to happen, both in working in an academic setting and with clients in consultancy situations.

As time has gone by, I have become much more explicit to individuals at the outset both about the *what* and the *how*. To elaborate on *what* we are doing, as well as offering those simple trigger questions mentioned earlier, I "coach" people in developing questions relating more explicitly to the development of their praxis – whatever field it is in. I talk to them about the concept of praxis and how praxis can be developed by asking searching questions about what they are doing and how they are doing it: I also discuss and model more explicitly the basic helping skills of active listening, suspending judgement, inquiry and re-framing.

But once this "scene-setting" is done, my role changes and I find myself participating in the group as a co-learner rather than as "leader" or "teacher", sometimes having the benefit of the group consult to me.

As I describe this form of work, I am conscious of how far removed it is from that early experience with the bankers, when maintaining the role of expert was very important – for me and for them.

In writing this, I am conscious also of how difficult it is to truly understand both what one is doing and the genuine intent behind the action. It would be silly to say that I am no longer conscious of the need that many – most? – groups and individuals have for some kind of "certainty" at the outset of learning or problem-solving processes. Some will want certainty about the substance or content of what's being done and what the outcome will be; some will want certainty about the process – how we will achieve these things; some want certainty about both. I think that what has really changed is that I am personally more confident about saying to people, in effect: "Within useful and agreed parameters, let us keep an open mind about what we will produce here; but let us be rigorous and careful about our process, so that we don't inadvertently limit our outcomes by the processes we use."

Because I am more confident in saying that, and in describing and modelling what I mean by process, I think I project confidence which in turn is taken up by the group. In some circumstances I say things like: "Nothing will happen here today that we, between us, can't work with productively and creatively, if we put our minds to it. We might argue, we might feel disappointed, we might feel that we are getting stuck, we might feel despair or rage or whatever it is. But if we acknowledge these reactions and put them at the disposal of the group, and if we make it our collective responsibility to work through them, then we can do whatever needs to be done."

Having offered the group some "certainty" at the outset, my interventions in the group are usually limited to those times when the group signals – either directly or indirectly – that they are "stuck" and want some assistance. Sometimes my intervention will be to invite them to explore their "stuckness" and sometimes it will be to move them through it by providing an alternative frame for what's being done – in terms of either the content or the task.

This is always, and inevitably, an exercise in the management of uncertainty – mine and theirs. But the choices about its management – on my side and, if I work effectively with my clients, on their side as well – are at least being informed by a recognition of our needs for certainty. We are not using a defence routine that "seals over" either our need for certainty or our lack of it.

This transition in practice has not been achieved easily. There have been many times when groups or individuals have not wanted to engage in that sort of process, or have been self-conscious about doing so. One of my Master's groups did not want to engage for a whole year, causing me – and them – to have serious crises of confidence about what we were doing and how we were doing it. My diary is full of incidents with individual clients when I felt at a complete loss to know what to do, have experienced their disappointment and my own sense of incompetence, berating myself for not

recognising the problem or for not having the courage to name it, seeing in retrospect the "obvious things" that I missed at the time.

Reflecting on reflection: trying to be "critically subjective"

Since this is a case-study in self reflective learning, I need to explain as well as I can how this reflective learning happened. It happened in four ways: by reading and re-reading my diary entries; by gaining insights from the literature about the things that limit and assist learning; by working and reflecting with people who, by their own words and actions both challenged my own practice and extended it; and by valiantly trying to practice the art of "reflection-in-action", to go to second and third position while in the midst of experience in order to make sense of it and create new options for action. On a really good day, my clients and colleagues go to second or third position with me and our sense-making is collective.

I think this thesis attests to the way in which the literature has informed my understanding of what I do. And the short stories will give some insight into how my colleagues helped. Before turning to those stories, I would like to explain the way in which diary work assisted me and to describe my efforts at reflection-in-the-midst-of-action.

At this point, I'll return to Rainer's (1980) work in order to explain more fully what her ideas did for me. I'd read Rainer's book *The New Diary* (Rainer, 1980) and Progoff's *At a Journal Workshop* (Progoff, 1975) and found them both very helpful. Rainer suggests that the act of writing can be helpful in many ways and offers many techniques to that end. Between them, they tap into four basic ways in which human beings engage with themselves and their world – the dimensions of sensate experience, intuitive and imaginative possibility, emotional expression, and cognitive sense-making. As a direct result of being introduced to diary work, I started to use the

process of note-keeping and the preparation of "field notes" in quite a different way. Words – my own and other people's – suddenly became very important. I became conscious of the times – and it seemed that there were a lot of them – when I would search for a "correct" professional term for something, instead of writing the words which others had actually used or which spontaneously came into my own mind. Over time, I became used to writing and then writing about writing, and I became more sensitive to the fact that I needed to do that kind of writing in addition to engaging in face-to-face dialogue.

As mentioned, Rainer suggests that there are four broad forms of diary writing, which respectively tap into the senses, the imagination, the heart and the head of the human being.

Sensate experience is heightened and remembered through *descriptive writing* – the most common and familiar form of expression in diaries. This can include any narrative account of external and internal experience – events, feelings, dreams, people, places, and in Rainer's view, satisfies the:

> defiant human desire to preserve certain "unforgettable" perceptions against the annihilation of time. There are moments which, for the artist in all of us, seem too important to pass into oblivion ... description does not transcribe reality, it re-creates one person's view of experience. Diaries have less to do with objective observation than with individual perception (Rainer, 1980, p56).

She also observes that in the act of description, we, inevitably, start to transform our experience.

> Anais Nin's diaries show how individual perception – more than any other factor – transforms the quality of experience. Some of the incidents she turns into magic in her diary were actually everyday occurrences that another person might have overlooked. But she observes the immediate world around her and finds the significance or symbolism just beneath the surface of the mundane, as in this diary depiction written in 1943:
>
> > In a Chinese shop I bought a Japanese paper parasol which I wear in my

> hair. So delicately made, with coloured paper and fragile bamboo structure. It tore. I repaired it with tape.
>
> When Samuel Goldberg took us to Chinatown for dinner I went into a shop to ask for parasols. The woman who received me was very agitated: "No, of course I don't carry those. They are Japanese. You bought them in a Chinese shop? Well, that may be, but they're Japanese just the same. Tear it up and throw it away."
>
> I looked at the parasol in my hand, innocent and delicate, made in a moment of peace, outside of love and hatred, made by some skilled workman like a flower. I could not bring myself to throw it away. I folded it quietly, protectively. I folded up delicacy, peace, skill, humble work, I folded tender gardens, the fragile structure of human dreams. I folded the dream of peace, the frail paper shelter of peace.
>
> The insignificant parasol becomes a vehicle for Nin to articulate her personal reverence for peace during the hatreds of wartime.
>
> In her diaries Nin not only described her world as it was but also as it appeared to her, enlivened by her values and perceptions. She wrote because she had to, to create a world in which she could live. In so doing she didn't avoid reality but embraced it and transformed it. Though the actual experiences are gone forever, the world she created lives as she captured it (Rainer, 1980, pp58-59).

Cathartic writing is done under the pressure of intense emotion that calls for immediate expression. This kind of writing might be disjointed, confused and full of seemingly unrelated thoughts and events, or it might take the form of extended, repetitive emotional language: "It hurts. I'm afraid. This can't go on. How has it happened? Who can help me? How long can I bear this?" It might be full of exaggerations and distortions, an extended curse to let off the steam of anger and resentment; or an expression of joy and excitement: "It's happened! We're going to America! I can't believe it! We're *going*!" As Rainer observes, many diarists find that they need to allow an emotional, spontaneous, cathartic expression before they can understand or transform it through the use of other diary devices.

Free-intuitive writing comes from the world of the imagination and the inner consciousness. Rainer observes that messages received from the unconscious through free-intuitive writing can sometimes contradict feelings expressed in cathartic or

descriptive writing and possibly operates by removing or putting aside the control of the conscious mind. It can also have important creative uses, tapping into our capacity to imagine possibilities that are not supplied by our immediate experience or "reality". This kind of writing requires an ability to relax, and just "go with the flow" of whatever comes to mind without worrying about whether it makes sense. In this mode of writing, nothing is irrelevant, and the diarist tries to capture every word and image that occurs. The lack of "self-consciousness" and "self-censure" associated with this kind of writing means also that the "mental models", assumptions and other personal scripts of the writer might be more directly recognisable. Argyris' (1991) "left- and right-hand column technique" – in which people are asked to write down one side of the page what they actually said, and on the other side of the page what they were really thinking – is a more structured form of free-intuitive writing.

Rainer uses the term *reflective writing* for the kind of writing in which one stands back to deliberately reflect on one's life and writing. This "third position" writing sometimes uses the abstract "you", indicating distance and de-personalisation: "It's hard when you are loved for the wrong things, or for things that shouldn't be important." Or it might take the form of speaking directly to the self, giving advice, coaching, encouragement or wisdom. "The Silver-Lining Voice" of self-helping and healing, "seems to enter a diary spontaneously and of its own accord, without any conscious effort on the part of the writer ... (it may be) a truth that the diarist had resisted when other people had suggested it" (Rainer, 1980, p69).

Some of the specific diary techniques described by Rainer include "mind-mapping", "unsent letters" and "dialogue". The latter draws on the Gestalt therapeutic technique (for example, Perls, 1969) of getting into an imaginary "conversation" with another person or with some part of oneself. One can "dialogue" in this sense with aspects of one's personality, one's self-doubts, people one knows or has never met, historical personages, dream figures, animals, fears, inanimate objects, images, symbols, part's of

one's body, one's religious, racial or cultural heritage, events or institutions. One can even use the device with "nameless voices that seem to be arguing in your head and sending insistent messages" (Rainer, 1980, p103). In the dialogue, one simply addresses the subject, whatever it might be, and simply allows it to speak in response.

Rainer observes that the Gestalt dialogue often appears in diaries when the writer senses the need to re-integrate parts of the self from which he or she feels separated or threatened (such as one's "angry" self, one's creative self or one's childhood self) or to get into conversation with people with whom one has trouble communicating.

I would contend that all of the forms of writing and the specific techniques described by Rainer are capable of triggering "reflection" in the sense that I have used the term in this thesis. Although some writing clearly comes from "first position" (without thinking or self-consciousness), once on the page, the words can become the subject of second or third position contemplation, in which personal scripts which were not part of one's awareness become easier to see – and ultimately, to possibly accept, and change.

To Rainer's work was added, courtesy of one of my colleagues, the concept of "grounded theory", as developed by Barry Turner (1988) among others. Turner's work was mentioned in earlier chapters, because one important aspect of this concept is the need to pay attention to the mental models which potentially sit behind the words on the page.

A specific example of using the diary to surface a personal script

I took Turner's idea and extended it to the notion of searching for personal scripts more generally, with the result that reading and re-reading my own diary has surfaced a very fundamental personal script. It goes something like this:

> To be an effective teacher or consultant, you must always accurately assess what is going on with the whole group, in terms of its dynamics, and you must always accurately assess what is going on for any of the individuals in it, and you must always know what is the best thing to do for them.

I have come to believe that this personal script was very prevalent in the way I operated in most of my professional life in counselling, research, management and consulting, until about four years ago when I surfaced and recognised it.

It did not go away, since it seems to be a very fundamental part of me. I can, however, train myself to be on the lookout for it, to recognise the early warning signs that it is in operation. Unless I do that, I am in the paradoxical position of espousing a set of theories (about adult learning) which are not reflected in what I actually do.

There are a couple of examples of the diary entries that generated that insight.

> This marks one of the worst days of my life. I needed that assignment and to publicly stuff it in front of Elizabeth herself – of all bloody people – means I'll probably never work in the field again. This is a small town and people have long memories. Why the bloody hell didn't I just bang their heads together and tell them to grow up. Why was I so afraid? Why? Why? What could they have done to me? As it was, I looked a fool, a complete incompetent who should never be let loose in the public domain (November, 1990).
>
> This is a nightmare. God help me for ever thinking I could do this. Whatever I do makes it worse. I've lost it in just the worse way. I'm shut up here with them for a week. I want to leave. If things aren't better tomorrow, I think I will. They are such buggers to each others and to me. But I knew that when I came – I knew in my bones they were going to be difficult. Why didn't I call it when I first saw it, instead of being caught up in this mess. I knew it. I knew it and yet I ignored it because I wanted to see it through. But why fall into the mire myself? I'm supposed to know better, my head does know better. So why am I afraid? Why don't I do what I know needs to be done? I had the moment – I had it several times over, but I was bloody paralysed. I'm inept beyond belief (February, 1991).
>
> This was very frightening but I think I handled it okay. I don't think they knew. But God, it was close. I'm getting better at wearing the mask. I kept going even though they were upset and I was upset and confused. In the end we got there but I had to paddle very hard. I've got a splitting headache but it was worth it (March, 1992).

I should explain that all these entries were generated in the midst of consultancy experiences which – when I look back on them now – would have tested the skills, wisdom and self-control of anybody who attempted to work with the groups. These were amongst the hardest assignments I've ever tackled. What was interesting to me, in reading about them, was that I ever thought that it was somehow my fault that these experiences were as awful as they were. In all these events, what was being enacted – or re-enacted – was a team script that was deeply entrenched and deeply toxic for all parties. My lack of wisdom was not so much in being unable to deal with the dynamics of the group, but in shouldering responsibility for them, genuinely believing that what had happened was somehow down to me, or that somehow, by donning the mask of competence, I could make it all right for them.

With time, my diary work began to focus on the early warning signals and to giving myself "reminders":

> I feel like I felt at the dinner I gave for my 40th birthday – you can ask the people to come but you can't force them to have a good time. You can't create learning/reaction/engagement out of thin air – it happens only when the people allow it to happen or create it themselves. What is the burden of responsibility I carry in myself to be the powerhouse and entertainer? I need to let it happen; let them make their own connections. Sometimes it needs to happen more slowly, without anxiety from me. This is where the people are; meet them where they are, not where I want them to be (April, 1990).

> I'm doing it again. Getting stuck on the design issue because I keep asking myself: Will they like it? Will it be interesting enough? Will it entertain them? I sound like a circus manager, or a nightclub act – wheeling the acts on and off the stage, getting the timing right, juggling the coloured balls. There has to be a more immediate way to engage them without "dressing up" what I'm doing (August, 1991).

What was being surfaced here were some key concepts about how I saw my role as a consultant – that it was up to me – single-handedly – to be the engine-room, the power-house, the generator of the group's energy, as well as the container of its anxiety and the leader of its intellectual effort.

Those *are* important issues and tasks for the group: What *is* deeply interesting to us? What *is* the most important work we need to do together? Do we have the wisdom to do it? Can anyone else help us? How? How will we get the best out of working with them? How will we sustain and most productively harness and manage our energy?

The point is, as I now see, that those are issues for the group and whoever works with them to ask and answer together. The facilitator or consultant's role, for me, is to make every effort that I can to ensure that those issues are surfaced and discussed as fully as they need to be. And in fact, that is largely how I "earn my keep" as a consultant, precisely by asking: "Why are you interested in working on this? Why are some of you less interested than others? How can I help you in ways that genuinely add value to the ways in which can already help yourselves?

I ask these questions when I first meet with clients and students and I go on asking them as we work together, and I encourage them to ask and answer these questions for themselves.

Reflection while in-the-midst-of-action

I spoke earlier about practising the art of reflection-while-in-the-midst-of-action, and my diary also gives some insight into how my practice has developed in this direction.

> I felt, today, that I finally climbed a high mountain and saw the world spread out around me. It was truly a peak experience. I want to savour it, it's so rare. I worked with 120 people and we did active listening and immediacy, and I modelled it and stopped the action at intervals, and processed what I was feeling and thinking, what the other ten who were directly participating in the activity were thinking and feeling, and how the observers – all 110 of them – were thinking and feeling. It was the greatest act of attending, listening, being there and being accessible that I have ever engaged in. It felt like "oneness", it felt

> like all my senses were open, that my intuition, and heart and brain were all in there, but that nothing was getting in the way and that it was easy. Hard in terms of concentration, but easy in the sense of knowledge-in-action. Thinking about it now is like drinking the headiest wine imaginable (February, 1992).
>
> She was right. It's just about attending, being there, filtering nothing, being aware of it and going with it, articulating only what's necessary but letting them know what you see and hear in ways that match and then slightly add to their own understanding. Not rushing it, not informing or taking over, but pacing the reflection and the addition of meaning. It works, it really works. Why ever did I think it was more complicated? Why ever did I think I had to be wise? (June, 1992).

What is being described here are my early experiences in trying to use reflection-in-action to help me develop my facilitation skills. In particular, I was trying to work with individuals and groups to help them surface some aspects of their scripts that might be limiting their capacity for effective action in certain situations. By this time, I had well and truly "re-visited" the helping or counselling literature and had sharpened my practical as well as my intellectual understanding of active listening and a skill which has been labelled "immediacy" by Carkhuff (1969) – the skill of operating in the "here and now", with all the data which arises out of an encounter between oneself and others. I had also had the benefit of working with a colleague in ways which will be described in one of the short stories.

This combination of practice and exposure to the literature had both heightened my awareness of what I was doing and at the same time had given me the tool for high level reflection on what I was doing. In the act of attending to and being immediate with others, I was able to attend to and be immediate in my own inner dialogue. This kind of reflection is not a matter of simply putting myself on hold to attend to someone else. It is about being deeply attentive to all that is going on in the dialogue, surfacing that data (either internally or directly in the dialogue with the other person) and finding helpful ways to access and offer data that seems relevant.

This is a highly skilled piece of behaviour. In the final chapter, I will attempt to "pick

it apart" conceptually, to describe and explain how and why it works. For now, I'm keen to try to convey what it is like in action. In practice, it results in a kind of internal dialogue that goes like this:

> This person seems very sad. As she talks to me about her efforts to work with this group, and how "nothing seems to work", she conveys that she has thought very deeply about the problems, is frustrated about her inability to somehow shift the thinking and behaviour of the team, and that it's time to bring in the heavy artillery (ie. a consultant). It's tempting for me to ride in at the head of the cavalry. I can hear myself about to say – "Of course that's worth trying, which date did you have in mind?" I can hear her expectation and feel my own desire to meet it: "I've heard you are very good and I think that if you can exercise a bit of discipline and urgency in your facilitation, they will respond to a stranger."
>
> At this point, it's very important for me to attend to what she is communicating at every level – both verbally and non-verbally – about her perceptions and feelings about her team and her experience of working with them. It's also important that I hear what she's communicating – verbally and non-verbally – about her expectations of me. It's vital that I hear my own internal response to that communication. It's important that I reflect back to her what I have heard and seen in the most helpful way that I can. And by helpful, I mean ways that will help her and me to make sense of what's happening to her and her team and ultimately, find ways of constructively changing it.
>
> Initially, I try to reflect back what she has said and that might have the result that she says more because she knows I am interested and listening. I might offer a summary that actually captures the essence of what she has said and – by distilling the essence – adds a little to our understanding of it. If this seems to help, I will try to capture some of how she might be feeling – and that might trigger a different, and deeper telling of the story, of her intentions and her reactions. We might explore how her intentions and reactions have impacted on the situation, for better or worse. The conversation shifts from what I might do for the group to what she has been doing and could do for the group. As she speaks, I try to actively attend and listen as deeply as possible, noticing everything about her as she communicates with me – including the language she uses and the non-verbal parts of the communication – and I ask myself: If I were a member of her team, what would I be feeling, if this is how she communicates? Would it turn me on or off? I eventually ask her to examine that herself. When she does, we both sense that part of the problem is the way she tackles the problem.
>
> At the end of the conversation, I maybe have a consultancy assignment, maybe I don't. She might not need me at all, or might not need me in the way she thought she did. I might end up working with her, not with the group.

Working in this way has required skills in attending, suspending judgement, and

actively listening to her and to myself. It has required reflection in ways that did not run significantly ahead of her of capacity to "hear" them – in other words, the sense-making process had to proceed at her pace, not at mine. Any re-framing of the situation had to grow out of her reflection on it, not simply be "dumped" by me. In any event, my re-framing of it might not be correct. It is *her* search for meaning, after all. I might be confused by what I'm hearing and seeing and confused by my own reaction to it. In some circumstances, I might be emotionally "hooked" at some level, and have to find a way to both surface that and work with it. As I help in the search for meaning, I might be looking through my previous experience, as Mintzberg (1973) and Nonaka (1991) suggest, looking for metaphors or templates that might help both of us make sense of what is, for both of us, a new and baffling situation. While all this is going on. I need to be extremely aware of what I'm communicating to *her*; of what my verbal and non-verbal messages are.

As will be explained in the final chapter, I cannot agree with Schein (1993) that this is simply active listening with a focus on one person's feeling and experience, and that it is not genuine dialogue. The dialogue with myself is continual, and my dialogue with her will have phases where I talk directly to her about how I think I can or can't help, where I ask her to clarify my thinking, and where we engage very explicitly in sense-making: Is it like this? Or this? Or this? What do we do *now*?

To fully appreciate the shift in learning and practice which all of this represents for this writer, I must take you back to the picture of myself offered at the start of this chapter: an "expert", inclined by training, experience and preference (I am an ENTJ in the framework of the MBTI, Myers, 1962) to offer judgement, advice and rational thinking as my first reaction and input in any encounter or situation. To that profile I must add that I am a classic ENTJ, full of imaginative possibilities but dis-interested in detail and especially sensate observation of others or myself; and unlikely to recognise my own or others' values and emotional reactions except in a delayed and uncalibrated

way. It is an understatement to say that I have re-invented myself. Through continued scrutiny and practice I have had to fully experience my prevailing first position behaviour, and the raw material (scripts) on which it was based, and learn its strengths and limitations and learn to work with that raw material in new ways.

At my best, I engage my senses in order to be fully attentive, I use my imagination and intuition to provide templates and metaphors from my previous experience, I engage my feeling sense in ways that don't diminish either me or my client, and I use my well-developed thinking capacity to orchestrate the whole.

In the next section of this chapter, I try to describe how my understanding and skill in these areas was extended by working through co-operative inquiry and practice with colleagues.

Part B: Learning with others: co-operative inquiry and practice

Introduction

In this part of the chapter, I will relate the four "short" stories focussing on the co-operative inquiry and practice entered into with four colleagues. These stories attempt to relate how theory and practice were integrated – in other words, the continue to track the development of the writer's praxis.

Each story is followed by a summary of the key foci of praxis development.

The names used to differentiate each of the stories are fictitious, but the stories themselves are not.

"Rebecca"

"You have to love them," she said.

"What?! What kind of half-baked bullshit is that?"

"This is a farce."

"What's love got to do with it?"

In the ensuing exchange – which I was not present for, but had re-played to me by a number of participants, blow-for-blow – no-one did find out what she meant by loving them. The debate took a different turn, became passionate about other ideas and other problems. But I'd heard her use those words before, and I thought I knew what she meant.

I had known Rebecca for a number of years but had only recently started to work with her, and to talk with her about that work.

The kind of work we were doing was in a hospital setting, with nurses and cleaners and cooks and allied health professionals and doctors and administrators and clerks with anyone, in fact, who wanted to come along to learn about performance appraisal – both as appraiser and appraisee.

The people came in large numbers. We ran many sessions together over six weeks, never working with less than twenty-five people. I thought I knew about active listening – although I hadn't been back to the books for many years, and hadn't actually talked or worked with a colleague to get feedback on my skills since being a post-graduate student. So, "I'll do that bit, if you like," I said. "Fine," she said.

After a couple of sessions, I asked her what she thought. "It seems to work okay. I think they're getting the hang of it. Let's keep going."

So we kept going, until one day, in the middle of a session, she got into dialogue with one of the participants who was feeling angry and affronted about the whole business of performance appraisal.

"This is all a management push to get us to do their dirty work for them. They run the place, they call the shots, and yet they expect us to haul our people over the coals, because the place isn't performing. I want no part of it." The person who said this was almost shaking with rage, his face was red, his voice loud and furious. As he spoke, he stood up and made as though about to leave the room.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, and I can see you're really pissed off. But before you go, I'd like to hear you out. Please stay and tell us why you're so angry."

The man stopped and half-turned back. "Why would you care! They pay your bills. You're with them."

"Yes, they do. But that doesn't mean I'm not concerned for you, or want you to leave. You think that management is asking you to be unfair to your people?"

"Well it's obvious. They sit skulking in their offices on the first floor, wouldn't know anything about what's happening at the coal face, but have the nerve to ram productivity gains down our throat. You can call it appraisal, but I call it tightening the thumb-screws. And this stuff, this is a wank. My people know how I feel about them and they don't need bloody appraisal forms to find out."

"So you're being asked to do something that seems crazy when you already have your own way of managing?"

"Not just crazy. Insulting! Insulting to me and to my people. They are good people; they work hard, like me. They don't deserve this."

"I can see how some people would find this insulting. Especially when they work hard. It could seem like the last straw."

"Listen, lady. I'll tell you what is the last straw. It's being pushed around – do this, to that, on and on. Never time to get anything done properly. Always more things to do and more things to worry about. I've got plenty to worry about without this shit."

By now the man is sitting down; there are people in the group who are looking nervous – it had been a nice quiet little session until this sudden outburst. Others are nodding agreement with him. One suddenly speaks: "Joe's right. This <u>is</u> a bit of overkill. I came because I had to – my manager gave me no choice. But frankly, I've got better things to do, and there are probably others in the room who feel the same way."

"Are lots of people in the same boat? Here because you were told to come?"

Lots of hands go up.

"Well, Nita and I certainly aren't interested in making you stay here if you think it's a waste of your time. Or if you're angry about it, like Joe. Can we talk about that – it seems more important than what we were talking about before."

Joe speaks again. He looks less red in the face, but he has found his voice again, and continues for some minutes to express his anger at management and his concern for his people. Throughout, Rebecca nods her head and her face registers concern. She sits forward as though to catch what he is saying, though he can be heard clearly all

over the room. At the end of his outburst, he draws breath. "So you can see why I think it's a waste of time. I mean no offence to you. But you can see where I'm coming from."

"Very clearly, yes. And I think it's important that I understand and that others who might have similar concerns understand you are saying that your team are the kind of people who make big places like this work. And you obviously care about them. If you and they had their way, what would you like to say to management about their ideas for productivity gains?"

"To stick them up their jumper, for a start." Laughs all round the room. Joe himself smiles. He is much more relaxed. He settles down to tell us a few home truths.

The whole exchange up to this point has lasted twenty-five minutes – a big slice of the time we have for the session. At the end of it, Joe suddenly says: "Anyway, I'm tired of all this. I'm getting too old and too set in my ways to care about all this. They can do what they like to me."

Rebecca says: "What are they doing to <u>you</u>?"

There is silence for a little while. Then: "Bugger all. That's the whole trouble. They don't give a damn. <u>I'm</u> the one who cares about the team. But them, they don't give a damn. I never see them from one month's end to another. Unless they want something. And then it's usually in writing. Then I hear. But I could drop dead in the meantime. And who would care?"

"It sounds like you and your team could do with a bit of acknowledgment and a few "thank you's"."

The end of this conversation comes when Joe stands up again, and this time really does leave – half an hour before the session is due to end. "Thank you, lady. I don't agree with performance appraisal, and I don't think we'll use it. But I enjoyed your session. I'd better get back now."

It has become very clear, as this dialogue has continued, that Joe is no longer angry, but in fact very sad. At one point, he looks close to tears; at another time, quite deflated.
When he has gone, Rebecca turns to the group and says: "What did you notice about the conversation we have just had?"

Somebody says: "You did a lot of listening." Somebody else says: "You treated him with respect."

And so on. The group then spends about ten minutes renewing this demonstration of listening skills; there is acceptance and understanding of that fact that this is how some appraisal sessions might sound. Rebecca then asks: "What do you think will happen next? Will Joe change his mind? Will he make use of appraisal – for himself with his manager, or with his team?" The group is mixed. Some think he won't. Those who know him say he will, that he'll go away and think about it. They are right. He does. He comes back to the next session.

This is a very simple story, and the telling does not do anything like justice to Rebecca's skill. This man was very angry, and at times very upset in other ways. It would not have taken much for him to cry. Had they been working one-to-one, I think he would have. There was something about the size of the "audience" that stopped him – and perhaps his own pride and self-respect. At no time did Rebecca agree with him, or try to change his mind or argue with him. But she certainly signalled to him loudly and clearly that she was able to accept *him*; that nothing he said could shock her, that

she understood and cared about what he was saying.

She did not need to say: "And by the way, your mental model about performance appraisal being a waste of time is simply a part of your projection of how you feel about management." By the end of the conversation, Joe knew that for himself. He also knew what the "real" issue was: that this had as much to do with his difficulty in communicating his own needs as it had to do with management's failure to meet them.

I was deeply moved by – as well as very admiring of – her skill in working in this way, particularly in such a large group. It was as though they were the only two people in the room. There was nothing clinical or aloof about her manner, nor was she soothing and protective. She projected concern and interest through her voice, her face and her body. And though she chose her words with care, they sounded completely natural. She looked and sounded totally at ease.

When I complimented her later and asked her how she did it, what she was aware of doing, she simply said: "It's nothing special. You just have to love them, and let them know that they can say anything and it won't turn you away. And you have to pay a great deal of attention to everything that's happening. You have to be there for them, not screening out anything that's happening to you or to them. It only becomes scary when you start to be afraid yourself but haven't noticed that fact. Then, probably everyone gets scared – without knowing it, of course."

Those remarks led to a great many conversations between the two of us, punctuated by regular opportunities to work together with clients.

"Stop worrying about yourself. Listen to yourself but don't worry about yourself." "How on earth do you do that?" "Simple. Just focus on them to begin with. Look at them. listen to them, immerse yourself in them, "lose yourself" in them to start with.

Then, when you've got your radio set properly tuned in to them, start listening for the residual background noise. That noise will be you, and it will be telling you something about how you are reacting to the broadcast."

This actually takes a great deal of practice, and describing how it feels and how to do it, is a very clear example of trying to surface tacit "knowing-in-action" (Schon, 1987). The "tuning-in" requires a capacity to notice individual things about the other person – like the sound of their voice, the colour of their skin, what they are doing with the hands, the sorts of words they use, the pauses, the way they engage with the other person – and at the same time, to notice the whole Gestalt or configuration (Fagan & Shepherd, 1970), to see the whole picture.

The concept of awareness is very central in Gestalt therapy and prompted by conversations with Rebecca, I went back to my "old" text books and found Fagan and Shepherd's description of the dynamics of Gestalt formation:

> Consider a person sitting alone reading. The book holds the centre of his interest: All the rest of the room has become background; in fact his body also has become background. It is not even correct to say that he is conscious or aware of this particular reading process: he is just engaged, in contact with the ideas. Suppose that in the midst of this reading, he gets progressively thirstier. What happens is that the mouth and the inside of the mouth become figural and soon dominate the field. The book moves into the background, and the person feels something akin to "I am thirsty!" He becomes aware, in other words, of a change in himself that has implications for his relationship to the external environment. His need tends to organise both the perceptual qualities of his own experience and his motor behaviour. He may have a visual image of a faucet or a glass of water or a can of beer in the icebox. He gets up, walks, satisfies the thirst, and comes back to the reading. Once more, the ideas become figural; thirst has been destroyed.

In this simple model we have the prototype of Gestalt formation and destruction (Wallen, 1970, p9).

When attending to or focusing awareness on another person, constant cycling between the figure and the ground of the Gestalt means that sometimes little things are quite

suggestive of something that the rest of the data does not reveal: a tiny – almost imperceptible – tapping of the finger that suggests impatience or unexpressed anger; a slight repetitive movement that suggests unacknowledged nervousness. This sudden focusing on one little thing, against the background of the whole Gestalt, can also, of course, be a way that we become aware of our own background noise of unacknowledged needs and anxieties.

The awareness of the Gestalt is something that takes time because it is never revealed in one instant. It takes time to hear a story told, to see and hear how data is overlaid with more data, to hear how connections are made and not made by the story teller, to notice the implicit assumptions and the mental models that might be operating.

As well as managing awareness, the process of active attending and listening as demonstrated by Rebecca – and as written about by Rogers (1961) among others – requires that the person doing the listening lets the other person *know* that they are being heard, by non-verbal and verbal responses. As described earlier in this chapter, this is a skill in its own right, since its success depends on not "rushing" the person by adding an overlay of meaning that they cannot yet hear or explore. More will be said about that aspect of the process in the last chapter, but it is a skill in its own right – and from this writer's experience, an extremely difficult one.

Active listening emerges from all of this as a complex skill and one which is certainly not reducible to a series of mechanical "ah has", and "uh hums".
Rebecca and I wanted to explain to our clients why the process "works" – in other words, why it seems to open up both internal reflection and reflective dialogue between people. We inquired of one another how we would each explain it to someone else, with the result that we pooled our thinking into the following statement:

- when a person perceives that someone else is interested in listening to them,

they feel, at some level, valued; in the simplest terms, the person is being acknowledged: "You are here, I'm listening and what you have to say is important enough for me to pay attention to you" is the implicit message;

- encouraged by that act of acknowledgment, the person is encouraged to go on, to tell us more;

- if they continue to receive acknowledgment, they may *really* open up, expanding upon both ideas and feelings; if there is a strong feeling content, there might be a cathartic release of that emotion, even a "dump" of ideas and feelings; at this point the person might not be making much "sense" but they are engaged in some kind of "release";

- this release is often followed by a period in which the person starts to get in touch with and make sense of (reflect on) their ideas and feelings; they might undertake this exploration for themselves; they might be ready to ask for or listen to the additional meanings which the other person has to offer (provided in the form of concepts or metaphors or similes or whatever else helps).

One of the things that both of us reported, was that while this process is going on and we are actively listening to someone else, there are many times when we ourselves become anxious. We explored what this anxiety is about, and concluded that anxiety is often greatest for us when the person is either dumping ideas and/or feelings, or struggling to work out what all the ideas and feelings mean. Confusion – and a sense of "stuckness" – can seem to last a long time, even when it is only a matter of seconds or minutes. It is very tempting to "rush in" with advice at this point, especially if one feels inclined to play the "expert" or has a natural preference (in MBTI terms) for offering judgement and reaching closure. It can be tempting to offer comfort at this point, because we don't like to see someone else at a loss or in pain. When I said that,

Rebecca observed that we are also, sometimes, responding to our own need – that someone else's distress and uncertainty causes us distress and uncertainty which we prefer to soothe away for both our sakes. In encountering another's search for meaning, our own identity is tested.

This adds yet another layer to the complexity of the listening process, since one is struggling to deal with anxiety or uncertainty of which one may be only partly consciously aware. And that means paying even more attention to the background noise on the radio set.

Rebecca's work with me was probably the single most significant influence on the development of my praxis. She triggered many lines of inquiry and experimentation, only a small amount of which has been described here. She is also a person who finds inspiration in the images of poetry and painting. These words – from a song by Bob Dylan – perhaps sum up the challenge of "being there" for someone else, in the way that I learned about from Rebecca:

> You walk into the room
> With a pencil in your hand
> You see somebody naked
> And you say "Who is that man?"
>
> You try so hard, but you don't understand
> Just what you will say when you get home
> Because something is happening here
> And you don't know what it is
> Do you, Mr Jones?
>
> Ballad of a Thin Man
> Bob Dylan

Summary

The experience of working and reflecting with Rebecca provides a clear example of trying to surface what Schon (1987) would call tacit "knowing-in-action". The

practitioners were attempting to develop their skill in assisting others to reflect on experience, and on their emotional and cognitive reactions to that experience.

The points at which theory or understanding and practice were integrated were:

- the development of practitioner awareness: the ability to tune into data which is internal and external to oneself, during dialogue with another person; the capacity to notice all the data, the whole Gestalt or configuration (Fagan & Shepherd, 1970) and to constantly cycle between the figure and the ground of the Gestalt;

- the complexity of the active listening response which requires of the practitioner not only high levels of awareness but also the capacity to stay with confusion, with stuckness or with pain – her own and that of others; to test one's own needs and capacity in the act of helping another search for meaning;

- insight into and a capacity to trust the dynamics of the reflective process which awareness and active listening can trigger in another person: namely, the experience of acknowledgment (being heard and valued) followed by cathartic disclosure and sense-making.

"Robert"

Earlier in this thesis I have mentioned the way Mintzberg (1987) and Nonaka (1991) suggest that we can tap into our previous experience and tacit knowledge in order to assist us – and others – in dealing with unfamiliar but complex issues, possibilities and problems. Nonaka writes about the use of metaphor in helping to tap into and "translate" tacit knowledge and awareness. Mintzberg talks about pattern recognition – noticing similarities and discontinuities in the fine print of our experience and being able to notice new and emerging patterns before they have finally "declared" themselves. He uses the metaphor of the potter's feeling for the clay, working with it in a way that combines the vision of the artist with the reality and texture of the material being worked.

Schon (1987) suggests that a great deal of our ordinary , tacit knowledge-in-action requires remarkable virtuosity in pattern recognition. Quoting Michael Polanyi's *The Tacit Dimension* (1967), he writes:

> Polanyi wrote, for example, about the remarkable virtuosity with which we recognise the faces of people we know. He pointed out that when we notice a familiar face in a crowd, our experience of recognition is immediate. We are usually aware of no antecedent reasoning, no comparison of *this* face with images of other faces held in memory. We simply see the face of the person we know. And if someone should ask us how we do it, distinguishing one particular face from hundreds of others more or less similar to it, we are likely to discover that we cannot say. Usually we cannot construct a list of features particular to *this* face and distinct from the other faces around it; and even if we could do so, the immediacy of our recognition suggests that it does not proceed by a listing of features.

Polanyi has also described our ordinary tactile appreciation of the surfaces of materials. If we are asked what we feel when we explore the surface of a table with our hand, for example, we are apt to say that the table feels rough, smooth, cool, sticky, or slippery; but we are unlikely to say that we feel a certain compression or abrasion of our fingertips. Nevertheless, it must be from this kind of feeling that we

get our appreciation of the qualities of the table's surface. In Polanyi's words, we perceive *from* our fingertip sensations *to* the qualities of the surface. Similarly, when we use a stick to probe, say, a hole in a stone wall, we focus, not on the impressions of the stick on the fingers and palm of our hand, but on the qualities of the hole – its size and shape, the surfaces of the stones around it – which we apprehend through these tacit impressions. To become skilful in the use of a tool is to learn to appreciate, directly and without intermediate reasoning, the qualities of the materials that we apprehend *through* the tacit sensations of the tool in our hand (Schon, 1987, pp22-23).

In my view, the bringing into awareness of such tacit knowledge becomes important when trying to hone one's skills in active attending and listening to others, or in trying to help others learn to do the same thing. Awareness of the other and of oneself is central in that process.

Awareness is one thing. Having the words to describe it is another.

I was fortunate to spend a whole year working with an academic colleague who was himself very interested in the process of "noticing" and the use of metaphor and image to help us describe and learn from what we notice.

To set the scene a little, I should explain that Robert and I co-taught (we would describe it as co-facilitation) a full year of the RMIT's Master of Business in Management. Robert was involved in about two-thirds of the sessions with students. The Master's group happened to be quite a small one, that year, and the learning community which was formed gave me the most pleasurable and stimulating experience of my academic career to this point. The group created an atmosphere very conducive to the free-play of inquiry on any topic or aspect of self which anyone wanted to introduce.

Robert and I worked extensively together in the preparation and running of several workshops on self-awareness and self-understanding which formed part of the RMIT's Graduate Diploma of Management. We ran these workshops over four years, and so had many opportunities for collegiate inquiry and practice.

One day, Robert told us that he was getting tired of what he called the "heroic antics" of the management literature. When we inquired what he meant, he reeled off examples of the extraordinary qualities that great leaders are supposed to have – vision, depth of organisational knowledge, daring, courage, persistence, and the kind of probing mind that grasps complexities and turns them into imaginative and creative options, usually on a global scale. "What about ordinary people?" he said. "Does this mean the qualities of greatness which seem to have taken over our textbooks provide the model we should all aspire to? I feel like inventing a model of management that is non-heroic!"

He was quite passionate about this, and the group said, "Why don't you? What would non-heroic management be like?" Over the course of the rest of the year, we both heard successive "instalments" and, through inquiry and practice with the ideas ourselves, I think helped to shape and enrich his thinking. Even without our contribution, his thinking was extraordinarily interesting and for all of us, very helpful.

Perhaps the easiest way to describe our dialogue is to give an example. He had been reading about the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Africa, and was struck by their skill in reading the signs of the desert. These skills are vital for their survival in a harsh and unrelenting environment, and the signs they must read provide them with the basic elements of life – water, food, shelter and the ability to detect and avoid danger in many forms. "Their wisdom," he said, "is the wisdom that comes from reading the stones – from paying attention to the smallest details that suggest disturbance by an animal, human, moisture or wind."

This wisdom requires attentiveness – he called it "critical closeness" – to minute detail, the development of Gestalten in which tiny discontinuities or deviations from the norm instantly stand out. It requires patience, and "lightness of touch" so that what is handled in not destroyed, taking its potential messages with it. It also requires "respect for the ordinary", not overlooking the obvious things that might be staring us in the face, or being blinded by the spectacular. It requires a kind of humbleness.

As Robert developed his ideas further, he explained that some of his reaction against the "heroic" models of management came from a dislike of the, "drama and crisis it implies and the self-importance of the heroes and heroines who rescue us from it." A non-heroic style, by contrast, values resilience, the husbanding of energy, and ingenuity and deftness in its application. It is not wasteful of energy and resources – whether one's own or that of other people, but seeks maximum leverage – the achievement of a result which is disproportionate to the effort applied. Deftness is required in the placing of the lever, to find the point of greatest purchase. Leverage is sometimes best achieved from a distance, rather than by tackling issues and people head-on, with the direct and up-front application of power.

The group – myself included – were totally captivated by this metaphor. The manner of his offering it to us was itself a source of powerful learning for me. He offered it in a non-heroic manner – that is to say, humbly, tentatively, and in response to inquiry and interest, rather than as a formal polished presentation. As the conversations progressed, he became what I could best describe as a "story-teller" and in fact, the group would often say, "tell us another one," meaning: "Give us another metaphor."

This was not just an exercise in hearing the metaphors. We put them to work. All of the students in the group were middle-level managers in various organisations, and they thought they would like to take the non-heroic approach and discover what

wisdom they could read in the stones. They reported some fascinating experiences which significantly influenced their own practice. For example, one person related that he had started to realise that his CEO was a "big-game hunter", who actually thrived on sustaining an atmosphere of drama and suspense in the organisation: "Who will he get in his sights next?" Another decided to go rummaging amongst the stones himself, and discovered that his organisation almost completely failed to tap into the wisdom of those who actually developed and delivered the services of the organisation. The only admissible vision came from the top, from the inner sanctum of an elite few. Another reported that when he went looking for wisdom in small things, he discovered that he was too impatient for the task, too much the "big-thinker" to find it interesting.

The last reaction was very similar to my own. I have already described how difficult it is for me, a person whose preferences take her into logic, judgement, early closure and intuitive data, to pay attention and develop awareness of the quality demonstrated by Rebecca. "Paying attention" in the sense that Robert's metaphor suggested, was always going to be a challenge. The metaphor helped, however, and encouraged me to regard the act of listening as a discipline, or craft, to be mastered. I also learned, progressively, to trust my eye and ear to discern subtle shifts in the Gestalten.

It was Robert who also reinforced for me the importance of patience – that the accumulation of insight, into oneself or others or any "external issue", is not always (or even often) a matter of blinding moments of revelation, but more the gradual emergence and accumulation of insights as one walks around in circles (like the Bushmen), seeking clarity. In the sense of dialogue, that can mean "sitting things out", allowing space and silence for reflection, waiting for clarity rather than "forcing it". It can also mean having the patience to hear the story told and re-told, many times, but each time with an added layer of meaning and insight.

Like Rebecca, Robert was aware that the creation of such silence exposes us to the

experience of ourselves – to the strengths and the limits of our wisdom and skills, as well as our anxiety about ourselves, and our basic trust and self-confidence in ourselves. At such times, non-heroism invites us to experience and tolerate ourselves as "ordinary", to participate in the ordinary, without the need for special events to make us feel special.

It requires of us, also, a basic respect for what is – that learning proceeds when we come to truly "see" and "hear" and understand what already exists, before leaping to sweep it away and replace it with something new. This is not the same as saying that nothing must change. Robert described a concept which he called "radical conservatism" which, as I understand it, means the ability to engage with (listen to, attend to, see) something, someone, an idea or a situation so as to develop a state of knowingness in which its true nature is gradually revealed. In that stage of knowingness, the pattern or scripts inherent in a person, a group or an organisation, become clearer and the possibilities for growth and change are also more obvious.

As a result of working with Robert, the development of both my practice and my theory received a big injection of energy. My "reading of the stones", in terms of attending behaviour, became even more important but was transformed from something to be admired in someone else (Rebecca) and – it must be admitted – practised in rather a hit and miss fashion – to a rigorous discipline to be practised everyday. My "theory" or understanding was enriched because the concept of "respect-for-what-is" drew me again back to the counselling and therapeutic literature – this time to Gestalt therapy. I will say more about this later, but in essence Gestalt therapy offers, among many other concepts, the "paradox of change"; the nation that "one can change only when one is truly oneself".

> When we are fully what we really are, we open the possibility of making changes. Attempts to deny or suppress elements of ourselves lead to self-defeating mechanisms and rigidity of behaviour. F. Perls suggested that it is futile to attempt self-improvement in the way that most people mean it. If a person is constantly trying to improve, that person is focusing on a Gestalt about

> "trying" that will never be finished. That person changes only by stopping the attempts at improvement and by allowing him- or herself to be exactly what he or she is, thus opening the way to confront unfinished Gestalten. The only way unfinished Gestalten may be completed is by affirming the truth, no matter what it is.
>
> For a moment, let us compare the paradoxical theory of change with a famous paradox proposed by Zeno. According to Zeno, an arrow speeding on its way to its target does not move, because at any one instant of time the arrow is motionless. An instant is the eternal present, the moment of no movement; therefore, as life is a succession of instants, the arrow is motionless. Yet it still hits the target. The paradox comes from dividing time into segments so small that it gives the appearance of having stopped; yet in actuality, time does not stop, and the arrow is moving in the context of time moving.
>
> Likewise, to be totally what one is at any time does not negate the change that occurs through time. Persons can only be what they are. When they are totally in the present, they do not have a sense of change and yet, they are changing. This seeming contradiction or paradox comes from the superimposition of two contexts, the momentary and the on-going, on the notion of change (Korb et al, 1989, p70).

The other very important lesson for this writer was the practical experience which Robert provided in working with metaphor to tap into tacit knowledge and open up truly creative possibilities for action learning and change. From one single – albeit sustained – metaphor derived from the Bushmen of the Kalahari, Robert stimulated a wealth of development for me and, I believe, for all the others in the group. In that sense, Robert was like an artist in the way he worked – offering us insight into both the importance of working with and knowing intimately the clay of our experience and our personal scripts, and at the same time, using metaphor and imagination to transform the meaning and possibilities inherent in the raw material. Selection of an apt metaphor in this way is a powerful way of both making sense of and tapping into past experience, understanding what is, and opening up creative possibilities for what might be.

Robert suggested a number of other metaphors to us during our year together, including the metaphors that arise from the consideration of myth. In myth, he suggested, metaphor emerges as an identity, a person, not just a simile or an

adornment. There have been a number of books which help us to access the wisdom inherent in mythology, in archetypes and in legend more generally (see, for example, Bulen, 1989 and Estes, 1992).

Robert suggested we use this in a very practical way. "Imagine," he said, "that you wanted to invoke for yourself the power of a god or goddess, that you wanted to feel their presence, ask for their help, come under their influence, be empowered by them. You have now read about some of the Greek mythological figures: which one would you summon up if you could?"

This suggestion led to a whole day of talking and thinking and writing, some of it private and some of it shared. As people revealed who they had summoned, the group worked with them to explore how they felt, why it was important, and what it would take to summon the god or goddess at any time into their thinking, feeling and action.

On another occasion, we wrote down lists of the images we had of ourselves as managers, leaders and learners over the past twelve months. Mine included things like "being tested in the fire", of having to forge my own inner strength in order to be able to understand the heat of some of the situations in which I worked; of feeling, at times, that I needed to provide heat and energy and momentum for others. Robert's suggestion that Hephaestus might be the god whose strength I was seeking lead to a rather lovely twist: Hephaestus was the crippled Craftsman and Inventor, who made armoury and jewellery in the heat of the forge. Working alone, often consumed by passion, often feeling rejected, Hephaestus worked with his hands and heart, creating useful tools and beautiful jewellery. For someone who relies on her head and her imagination, to invoke this god is to invoke the shadow side of herself. And because of my imagination, this metaphor created insight for me that a more abstract presentation would have blurred.

The use of myth in these kinds of ways leads to any number of interesting ideas and possibilities, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore them – or the way in which I have tried to work with them myself. But before closing this part of the story, there is one other – "just one more story, please!" – pathway that was illuminated for me by Robert (to use a rather more hackneyed metaphor).

Robert told us that one of his own favourite writers is Michael Leunig, the Melbourne-based cartoonist whose pictures and words attend to the small things of life which are – at the same time – so heart-breakingly important. "He has a gentleness about him, a wryness, an astuteness of observation that I think epitomises the wisdom of the non-heroic manager."

The introduction to *A Common Prayer* (Leunig, 1990), contains a very moving and beautiful description of the act of prayer, which I think has some value in the present context. If we substitute the word "reflection" for "prayer", I think the words can speak for themselves.

> I have drawn a simple picture of a person kneeling before a duck to symbolise and demonstrate my ideas and feelings about the nature of prayer. I ask the reader to bear with the absurdity of the image and to remember that the search for the sublime may sometimes have a ridiculous beginning. Here then is the story behind the picture.
>
> A man kneels before a duck in a sincere attempt to talk with it. This is a clear depiction of irrational behaviour and an important aspect of prayer. Let us put this aside for the moment and move on to the particulars.
>
> The act of kneeling in the picture symbolises humility. The upright stance has been abandoned because of the human attitudes and qualities it represents: power, stature, control, rationality, worldliness, pride and ego. The kneeling man knows, as everybody does, that a proud and upright man does not and cannot talk with a duck. So the upright stance is rejected. The man kneels. He humbles himself. He comes closer to the duck. He becomes more like the duck. He does these things because it improves his chances of communicating with it.
>
> The duck in the picture symbolises one thing and many things: nature, instinct, feeling, beauty, innocence, the primal, the non-rational and the mysterious unsayable; qualities we can easily attribute to a duck and qualities which coincidentally and remarkably, we can easily attribute to the inner life of the kneeling man, to his spirit or his soul.

The duck then, in this picture, can be seen as a symbol of the human spirit, and in wanting connection with his spirit it is a symbolic picture of a man searching for his soul.

The person cannot actually see this "soul" as he sees the duck in the picture but he can feel its enormous impact on his life. Its outward manifestations can be disturbing and dramatic and its inner presence is often wild and rebellious or elusive and difficult to grasp: but the person knows that from this inner dimension, with all its turmoil, comes his love and his fear, his creative spark, his music, his art and his very will to live. He also feels that a strong relationship with this inner world seems to lead to a good relationship with the world around him and a better life. Conversely, he feels that alienation from these qualities, or loss of spirit, seems to cause great misery and loneliness.

He believes in this spiritual dimension, this inner life, and he knows that it can be strengthened by acknowledgment and by giving it a name.

He may call it the human spirit, he may call it the soul or he may call it god. The particular name is not so very important.

The point is that he acknowledges this spiritual dimension. He would be a fool to ignore it, so powerful is its effect on his life so joyous, so mysterious, so frightening.

Not only does he recognise and name it, but he is intensely curious about it. He wants to explore it and familiarise himself with its ways and its depth. He wants a robust relationship with it, he wants to trust it, he wants its advice and the vitality it provides. He also wants to feed it, this inner world, to care for it and make it strong. It's important to him.

And the more he does these things, this coming to terms with his soul, the more his life takes on a sense of meaning. The search for the spirit leads to love and a better world, for him and for those around him. This personal act is also a social and political act because it affects so many people who may be connected to the searcher.

But how do we search for our soul, our god, our inner voice? How do we find this treasure hidden in our life? How do we connect to this transforming and healing power? It seems as difficult as talking to a bird. How indeed?

There are many ways, all of them involving great struggle, and each person must find his or her own way. The search and the relationship is a lifetime's work and there is much help available, but an important, perhaps essential part of this process seems to involve and ongoing, humble acknowledgment of the soul's existence and integrity. Not just an intellectual recognition but also a ritualistic, perhaps poetic, gesture of acknowledgment: a respectful tribute.

Why it should need to be like this is mysterious, but a ceremonial affirmation, no matter how small, seems to carry an indelible and resonant quality into the heart which the intellect is incapable of carrying.

> Shaking the hand of a friend is such a ritual. It reaffirms something deep and unsayable in the relationship. A non-rational ritual acknowledges and reaffirms a non-rational, but important, part of the relationship. It is a small but vital thing.
>
> This ritual of recognition and connection is repeatable and each time it occurs something important is revitalised and strengthened. The garden is watered.
>
> And so it is with the little ritual which recognises the inner life and attempts to connect to it. This do-it-yourself ceremony where the mind is on its knees; the small ceremony of words which calls on the soul to come forth. This ritual known simply as prayer.
>
> The garden is watered.
>
> A person kneels before a duck and speaks to it with sincerity. The person is praying (Leunig, 1990, pages not numbered).

Summary

The experience of working with Robert illustrates the powerful application of metaphor (in the ways that Nonaka, 1991, suggests) to tap into and translate tacit knowledge-in-action into explicit knowledge. For this practitioner, that explicit knowledge was then made available and helpful in dealing with the complex and ambiguous data which are present during attempts at deep levels of reflection.

Apart from understanding the value of metaphor itself as a reflective technique, the result of working with the metaphor of the Bushmen of the Kalahari was a number of very important steps in this practitioner's praxis development. The metaphor provided words and concepts which described and explained (built meaning around) several aspects of practice. Where Rebecca had laid the groundwork by stimulating intensive excursions into practice, coupled with attempts at understanding what was going on, Robert moved the development of that understanding even further. In respect to reflection, the key elements can be summarised as follows:

- the importance of pattern recognition per se: noticing similarities and discontinuities in the fine print of our experience and being able to notice new and emerging patterns in the Gestalt before they have more clearly defined themselves (in Chapter 3 this was recognised as a critical skill in the age of discontinuity for nations and organisations); for individuals, the significance also lies in being able to acknowledge experience that is ambiguous and not yet clearly formed (whether one's own experience or that of another);

- "critical closeness": attentiveness to the detail of the development of the Gestalten;

- patience and lightness of touch so that the subject of reflection is not destroyed by the act of reflection;

- in dialogue, this means allowing space and time for reflection, waiting for clarity, not forcing it; if necessary, hearing the story told and re-told but each time with added meaning and insight;

- this implies acceptance that meaning and insight will emerge gradually and cumulatively as one walks apparently in circles; and acceptance that there will probably not be blinding moments of revelation;

- it implies deftness and subtlety in the finding of leverage, rather than the head on application of "heroic" power;

- it also implies an acceptance of "ordinariness" and a respect for what is, in one's self and others;

- it suggests a capacity to respect oneself, to experience one's strengths and the

> limits to one's wisdom and skills, to encounter and live with anxiety about one's competence-in-action; to have basic trust and confidence in oneself; and to accept the exposure of self that the reflective act entails.

Working with Robert also sowed a seed that is taken up in the next story: the concept of the Gestalt paradox of change, the idea that we can only change when we are most truly ourselves.

"Alan"

I first met Alan in the worst possible circumstances. It was during a week long workshop which was probably the worst single experience of my consulting life so far. It triggered one of the diary entries cited earlier in this chapter and at the time, seemed like a crisis of major proportions. I didn't have any idea of what to do. Everything I tried seemed to make things worse and the level of hostility and anger in the group was enormous.

My commonsense told me, in retrospect, that the anger had little to do with me. I don't offer this as a defensive excuse. It was literally the case that on the first evening, only one hour into our time together, two participants told me that they had no wish to be at the workshop; one told me that my methodology – an approach which asked them to develop a learning contract (for their own private use) was "the manipulative work of the Devil"; another, on the strength of that remark, declared that she had no wish to work with me; and the rest simply would not talk – to me, or to each other.

This workshop – which was attended by twenty-five training and development professionals – "went down in history" in that organisation, as over the months and years that followed participants analysed and reflected on what had gone wrong. The sponsor of the event – who was present that week but played little or no active role and simply let it happen – offered me a formal apology (unsolicited by me) and explained that the group had been the subject of a great deal of what she described as political manipulation by senior executives of the company, with the result that members of the group were playing each other off (and being played off against each other by others). While this is what was happening in practice, on the surface the members of the group would not acknowledge any conflict with each other. In fact, they adopted a public united stance that went something like: "We are a caring group in which anyone can say anything they like; we value openness and dislike manipulation in any shape or

form. People in this group at all times are free and spontaneous in their behaviour." This was said to me on several occasions, both inside and outside the group, during the week.

This group's anger was undiscussable and had been so "sealed-over", to use Argyris' (1991) term, that any discussion of it being avoided was itself not only avoided, but angrily denied. For example, when I tried to suggest that there was anger in the group, the hostility toward me intensified considerably. I was a natural target for all that undiscussable resentment and boy, did they have a terrific amount of target practice.

At the time, Argyris hadn't written his article, and I hadn't got that wisdom from anywhere else and I thought it was all my fault – that there must have been something I had done to cause this, and that my efforts at trying to fix my mistake were inept. Although I don't think, now, that it was my "fault", I think there were things that I could have done differently. For example, at some point during that week I could have said something along the lines of: "This clearly isn't working for you and it sure as hell isn't doing much for me, so what's going on? Let's talk." Instead of which, I battled along, thinking that if I just showed enough acceptance, openness and calmness, we'd get through it somehow. We did get through it somehow, but I think that when it came to "immediacy", to really acknowledging and surfacing what was going on in the group, my courage and skill failed me. By taking a burden of guilt and failure on myself, I effectively blocked myself and them from paying attention to their own dynamic.

If I had to work with that group again – God forbid! – I would almost certainly want to have a second facilitator, given that there were over twenty people involved. As Rebecca pointed out to me later: "You – or anyone else – would be stretched to deal with that level of anger and dysfunctional behaviour on a one-to-one basis. What on earth made you think you could do that kind of therapy with twenty people at once?"

And I would be a lot more insistent that the group develop some "ground rules" about how they proposed to reflect on any data created by or in the group, as well as on their own private experience. In one of his articles, Argyris (1991) talks about working with a group which had effectively sealed-over any discussion of their own competence (and their doubts about it) and was engaging in lots of blaming – of their clients, their management, and their competitors. He also makes the comment – which gave me belated comfort – that when a group is being very defensive, they are often feeling and displaying negative emotions, but the blame for those emotions is put onto others. The very "openness" of an "open" individual, he suggests, might arouse even greater feelings of upset and anger. So now he tells me! Although describing the symptoms very clearly and explaining the dynamics, the article is not very explicit about how to surface the dynamic. He suggests "left and right hand" column work, and patient feeding back of the data being observed by the facilitator.

I think those techniques are helpful, but I also believe that there are times when groups are so truly "stuck" in self-protective scripts, that it might take a bit more than that to surface what's going on in ways that the group can acknowledge and work on. It might help to know a bit more about how and why people and groups come to be "stuck" in the first place.

Enter Alan, who, like me, had been quite overwhelmed by what was going on in the group and could think of no constructive intervention. He did a very helpful thing, however, which was to talk to me about what was happening at intervals during the course of the week. I should add that Alan's presence was seen by the group as being a bit "infra-dig" or beneath them, in that he was not a trainer, like themselves, and was at the workshop to provide administrative and other support.

It transpired that Alan was undertaking a three-year training program to prepare him to work as a Gestalt therapist. He had just completed the first year of the program and

tentatively suggested to me that perhaps the best I could do in the circumstances was to gain some insight into what was happening to *me*. At the time, he jotted down some diagrams and notes on a rough piece of paper and tried to explain some of the Gestalt "basics" to me. The effort was not very successful in deepening my understanding because – frankly – I had reached such a point of upset that my whole mental and physical energy was directed to "not falling apart in front of the group" while working through the basic issues we had convened to tackle. And Alan, while trying to help, was for that week considerably less articulate and confident than I subsequently experienced him as being.

I still have his scribbled notes and diagrams. I gathered that he believed they were important, and I appreciated the fact that he was trying to help me. I also worked out that he was talking about something called the Gestalt cycle, that would help me to track my energy and to work at where and how it was getting blocked. I was so anxious and uncertain about what the next day would bring that I put those notes in my briefcase, took a couple fo aspirin, went to bed and stayed awake until four o'clock in the morning.

Two years later, I read an article called "Organisations Get Stuck Too", by Critchley and Casey (1989). There, on the second page, was Alan's diagram.

> The notion of a cycle, starting from rest and moving through a phased cycle of energisation back to rest, is central to Gestalt. The cycle describes the essential nature of the interaction between an organisation and its environment. It is a natural cycle and individuals move through its phases with or without help; or they may get stuck. The cycle describes a flow and ebb of energy in the continuous process of need fulfilment essential to an individual's survival and growth. We move from rest through a series of phases to full contact with our food, with our friends, partners or colleagues or issues which we need to tackle, followed by satisfaction and withdrawal.

The first phase, as a new experience begins to emerge, is internal sensation; as we begin to focus the sensation on to something or some person in our external environment, we attach meaning to the sensation; this is described as "awareness". As

we become aware of what the sensation is telling us – as we give it meaning – we begin to mobilise our energy toward the external object through clarifying the nature of the interaction we want. We then take concrete action to bring about contact; at some point when the fullness of the experience is realised, we achieve satisfaction, and then we finally withdraw from the experience and another cycle may begin (Critchley & Casey,
1989, p4).

Figure 3 represents the cycle described by Critchley and Casey.

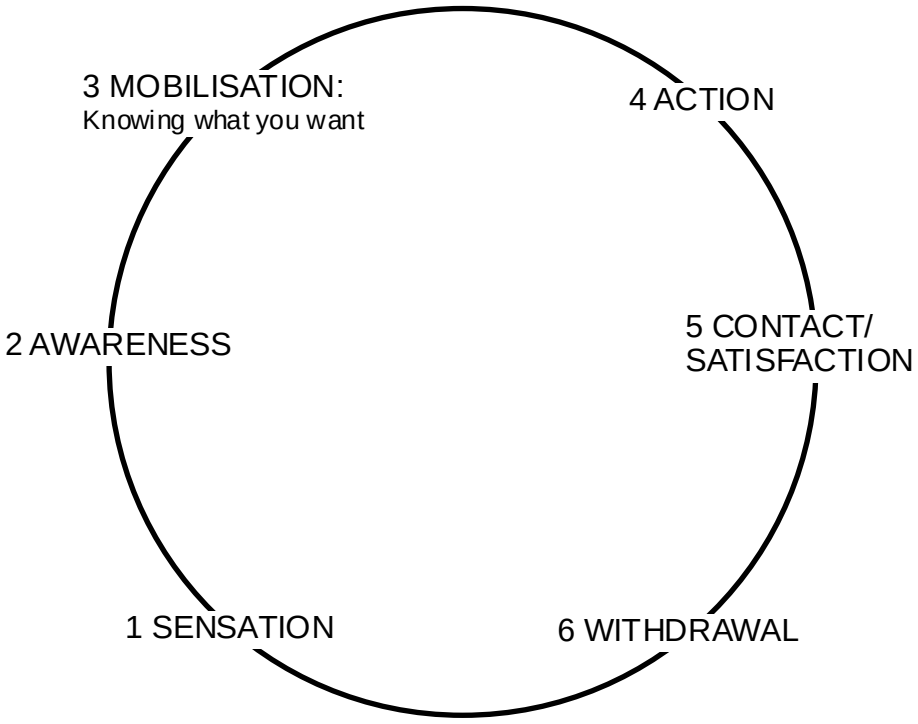


Figure 3: The Gestalt cycle of awareness (Critchley & Casey, 1989, p4)

I rang Alan in a great state of excitement. "Tell me more about this. What does it mean to *you*?"

Alan explained that the aim of Gestalt therapy is to develop more "knowing" behaviour; that is, to enable individuals to act on the basis of all possible information

and to apprehend not only the relevant factors in the external field, but also relevant information from within. Individuals are encouraged to pay attention at any given moment to what they are feeling, what they want, and what they are doing. The goal is non-interrupted awareness. By becoming more aware, individuals can discover how they interrupt their own functioning. Interruptions usually signify resistance. What we are resisting is becoming fully aware of the needs that organise our behaviour. If we become fully aware, then we are able to uncover those needs and discover the ways in which we prevent ourselves from experiencing those needs.

The concept of awareness is very important in Gestalt therapy, which also calls attention to the way in which a person blocks or interrupts his or her communication, either with their internal "self-system" or through the interpersonal system. Awareness of blocks can be facilitated by directing attention to what the body is doing, what the mind is doing, and what is or is not going on between people (motoric, symbolic and interpersonal behaviours).

"It means," he said, "that you have to meet yourself where you are, not where you want to be, and if you want to help other people, then you have to meet them where they are, not where you want *them* to be."

In talking to Alan, I had one of those "peak" experiences of insight that are so rare and so exquisite. Suddenly the wisdom that I gained from working with Rebecca about attending and "being there" had a theoretical model to attach itself to, as did Robert's insight about "respect for what is". "The paradox of change" suddenly made more sense.

Alan said that what he had been trying to do two years earlier, was help to understand how I was blocking my own awareness – both of what was going on "out there" in the group and what was going on inside me. The real need of all the individuals in the

group was to find ways to review and make sense of the competencies required of them by their organisation, and get to grips with the competencies they actually had. This need, however, was too difficult to acknowledge, given a context in which admission of any level of incompetence – or even doubt about competence – was taboo. Awareness of that need became effectively blocked.

It would have been very difficult for me – as it was for him – to help the group recognise and work with the block, given that my own awareness of important data, both external and internal, was seriously blocked. We discussed what might have been the point in the cycle at which I was blocked. After some time, we agreed that I had probably become stuck somewhere between awareness and mobilisation.

In order to work this out, Alan had to teach me about what stuckness looks like at each stage of the cycle.

Stuckness at the stage of sensation results in *repression* (the absence of feeling); at the stage of awareness it results in *hysteria* (literally a hurtling into sudden changes of anger and uncertainty that comes from the unconscious, without making much sense to the person); at the stage of mobilisation, stuckness produces a state of being *knowing-and-angry* (there is a lot of emotion and a lot of ideas, but it is not focussed; and it is disorganised and impotent energy); it produces *fear* at the stage of action (the person has focus, knows what to do but is frightened to act); being stuck in the stage of contact means being *frantic* or *driven* (the person engages in lots of activity but never "consummates", fully engages or follows through to the point where something is usefully accomplished); and at the stage of completion, stuckness results in *exhaustion* (the work is done but the person cannot leave well enough alone and withdraw).

The kind of dialogue I had with Alan was very different from that with my other colleagues. He lives in Brisbane, I live in Melbourne, and although we had exchanged

letters since meeting at the workshop, and sometimes met in the context of further work I did for the organisation (yes, I lived to fight another day – but that's another story) we had not really made or found the opportunity to talk in depth since the workshop. Until now. Galvanised by my excitement at finding the article, I talked to him without worrying about the cost of the call for nearly two hours. We met on two or three occasions over the following couple of years, but never had quite the same animation and engagement. Our relatively limited dialogue had all taken place in times of turbulence – although the second kind of excited turbulence was at the opposite end of the scale to the first turbulence of the first meeting.

Limited though it was, the dialogue was very important to me in helping to put a theoretical underpinning to the things which had engaged me both emotionally and intuitively when working with Rebecca and Robert. I began to realise that all my failures in facilitating learning and problem-solving could be traced back to a failure, on my part, to attend as fully as possible to the internal and external data, and to be prepared to meet the people where they are, not where I want them to be.

Critchley and Casey (1989) make the suggestion that just as individuals get stuck, so too do groups and organisations, resulting in some dysfunctional scripts. They also suggest that failure to be aware of the stage at which they are stuck can lead to facilitators being trapped into inappropriate interventions. The same thinking, of course, applies when facilitating or helping on a one-to-one basis. Their advice is to meet the individual, group or organisation where they are, to attend and make interventions that implicitly acknowledge the messages being given.

Their advice is summarised in Table 5.

Summary

This short story provides an example of how theory and practice were integrated into praxis for this writer. It's hard to overestimate the impact of the cycle of awareness on the writer's thinking. Along with the Gestalt notion of the paradox of change, and Gendlin's (1970) work on "self-meaning" and the role of symbolism in awareness (see Chapter 5), this material provided one of those deep "ah ha" moments of insight which suddenly illuminate experience and practice in a fairly dazzling way.

Table 5: The stages, interruptions, traps and interventions associated with the Gestalt cycle

Stage	Interruption	Trap	Advised Intervention
Stage 1: Sensation	Repression (absence of feeling)	Feeling *for* them. Trying to get them to feel, e.g. team building, encounter groups, "love-ins".	Collection of hard data about external threats and opportunities which they can believe in, or start to debate, thereby accessing "safe" feelings.
Stage 2: Awareness	Hysteria (feeling but not thinking)	Thinking for them and/or getting bogged down and "hooked" by their emotion.	Detached empathy; acceptance and acknowledgment of all emotions until the group is able to come more reflective.
Stage 3: Mobilisation	Knowing-and-angry (unfocussed thinking and feeling, confusion)	Thinking and planning for them, getting bogged down in endless diagnosis, analysis and planning.	Encourage them to "have a go" on the basis of "best guesses": experimentation, don't let action be inhibited by the lack of focus. Focus will emerge from action, not thinking and emoting.
Stage 4: Action	Fear (impotence)	Force them into premature action.	Build trust by letting them reflect on, surface, their real, perhaps unacknowledged fears and uncertainty.
Stage 5: Contact/ satisfaction	Frantic, "driven" activity (heavily into "task", lots of activity in starting things, but no sustained contact, implementation or follow-through, no experience of satisfaction, accomplishment or consummation.	"Join in" and beat them at their own game; come up with new and more efficient techniques, systems, alternatives, facts and tasks, supply "state-of-the-art" knowhow.	Get them to take time out to think about what they are doing; reframe the task to be about *how* they are doing things, not just *what* they are doing; but keep it business-like; turn everything into "task".

Stage 6: Withdrawal	Exhaustion, burn out; inability to "let go"	Enforce a sudden break from the action, tell them to take a holiday.	Gradually "ease off", but avoid sudden breaks which can lead to high anxiety, restlessness and sudden onset of illness. Find refreshing alternative tasks, until the person becomes "wholesomely weary".

(Based on the work of Critchley & Casey, 1989)

In alerting me to the value of the Gestalt cycle, Alan opened up a whole new way of understanding what it is that reflection achieves. In summary, the lessons were:

- that the goal and process of non-interrupted awareness is another way of describing what third position self-reflection tries to accomplish;

- that the goal of reflection becomes that of focussing on the way in which the other person (or oneself) blocks or interrupts his or her communication, either through their internal self-system or through the interpersonal system;

- that the act of reflection firstly requires the facilitator to identify and meet him or herself where they actually are in the awareness cycle (not where they want to be) and to deal with whatever block or interruption is in progress;

- that reflection secondly requires that the facilitator do the same for the person he or she is trying to help: that the facilitator recognise and meet them where they are, not where the facilitator wishes they were;

- that understanding of the nature of "stuckness", and how it blocks awareness, explains the paradoxical nature of change when the subject of change is human behaviour.

"Dominic"

In my telling of the three previous stories of encounters with others, the main focus has been upon the development of ideas and understanding. Although that thinking was both triggered by and tested in experience, my telling of the stories (except in the case of Rebecca) has not primarily highlighted the action experiences. The next – and last story – is primarily about action taken in company with others. The others were managers participating in a major development program for one of Australia's leading financial institutions, and Dominic, my co-facilitator and colleague.

The action takes place over the last two years of the work for this thesis, and so represents a stage which I regard as demonstrating reasonably well-integrated theory and practice.

It was – and continues to be – a wonderful assignment – a very large organisation requesting a new and innovative approach to the development of "change makers": senior people who could initiate, facilitate and lead change across many functions and levels of the business; and offering the commitment, resources and time to do it.

The people coming into this program are senior managers from all over the organisation. They make a voluntary commitment to participate in four residential workshops over eight months, and to each complete, over that period, two personal learning contracts and to each initiate "change-making" intervention in the organisation which will add significant value in terms that the organisation will recognise.

Dominic and I have spent hundreds of hours together, individually and with participants in planning, facilitating and participating in the program. Although the program's major focus is on self-managed learning, and on reflection on that learning,

the residential workshops also provide opportunity to provide some input and create experiential learning activities for the participants. "Learning to learn" and "learning to change" are key themes and every chance is taken to draw out the implications, in learning terms, of the experiences the program and the participants create.

"Designing" a program like this means creating opportunities for people to generate data – through action, discussion and thinking – which can become the subject of fairly intensive "third position" reflection. "Third position" reflection itself becomes the subject of reflection, as people "learn to learn" and experiment with change of all kinds; in themselves, their teams, their organisation's tasks, practice and culture.

Facilitation activities during the program include reflecting, with individuals and groups, on an experience they are having or have had, during the workshop or in the workplace; diagnosing development needs; reflecting on some aspect of their own praxis; and helping in the exploration and development of their own ideas and their conceptual understanding of models and theories contained in the literature.

Working in this way truly tests and extends every part of our repertoire in facilitation. The capacity for skilful reflection is not one, in my observation, that comes easily to all managers – even when confined to second position reflection, which is simply about stopping and thinking. Third position reflection – stopping and thinking about the way one thinks, for example – is difficult for most people, for all the reasons explored in previous chapters.

In these situations, it is not enough to offer a description or an explanation of reflection, and hope that everyone will immediately understand, accept and apply the idea. In assisting someone to reflect on their tasks, their praxis, their competencies and their personal scripts, one truly has to meet them where they are, not where you would like them to be.

We have found that it helps most people to have some sort of "framework" for the task of self-reflection, and to that end, Dominic and I invented the "diagnostic pyramid" which is described in the next chapter, which simply maps the layers of self-reflective work which are possible. We have found that by offering the pyramid and explaining the kind of work which can be done at every layer, the whole idea of self-reflection becomes less threatening and more like "a job of work", a task, like any other.

Of course, in practice, it is not like any other, and we have found that we need to continually model, coach and participate along with the managers as they try to incorporate self-reflective techniques into their repertoire.

Dominic is a man of few words, and I am an extroverted thinker, with the result that our dialogue has not always been easy. I have tried to slow down and switch off, creating spaces in which he can privately think. The end product of that thinking is often a "one-liner" which is not explained or justified, but simply left hanging in the air. Once in the air, my own mind and imagination takes hold of it and starts to overlay it with meanings that make sense to me but might have little to do with Dominic's own sense of things.

One such statement – often made to clients and to me – is: "What is the data telling you about what is going on out there, and inside you? What is it telling you about what you can or need to do differently, to get a different outcome?"

This is hard work, for most of us. It is hard enough to reflect on someone else's data – in the ways I tried to describe earlier in this chapter. Reflecting on one's own data, unaided, almost inevitably is limited by our own image of ourselves, as well as by the mental models which we are prepared to bring to bear on our own behaviour and interventions.

To illustrate this point, I will describe what happened on one occasion when I attempted to understand and evaluate my own efforts at facilitating someone else's reflection on their personal scripts. Then I'll compare it with the reflection that grew out of dialogue with Dominic on the same subject.

I had been working for about an hour with a manager who said he had no idea of anything he might do to improve or enrich his practice as a manager. He had been in the job for fifteen years and in the company for all of his working life (about thirty years). "There is nothing about the job I can't handle and my boss's job just doesn't pose a challenge either – I've been relieving in his job for a total of six months out of the last two years. I can't think of anything that would stretch me, now," he said.

He was not being obviously "defensive"; he seemed to be genuinely struggling to find a development opportunity that "wasn't just a wank, or doing something for the sake of it."

As he talked, I was trying to collect data myself – his choice of words, the way he spoke, his non-verbal behaviour, his way of communicating with me and others. I noticed that he seemed relatively low in energy, and that though he talked a lot in a low unvarying tone, he showed little interest in any of the comments or suggestions made by others in the group. To every idea, he replied with a "yes, but": "yes, I think that's a terrific idea; trouble is, we don't have the sort of resources that something like that would need; I can't just go off and do my own thing." He did not, any at stage, ask a question or encourage anyone in the group to share their thinking with him.

The tone was serious, flat, self-contained and containing – in the sense that his responses to people seemed to close off conversation, rather than open it up. After a while, I think others in the group started to find him "heavy going" and the silences got

longer. I examined my reaction to him. I found that I was a bit bored, that I was having to work hard to pay attention because he offered so little opportunity to actually "engage" with him. He almost seemed to be talking to himself. It occurred to me that if we found him boring and "heavy going", then probably others did too...

So I asked him: "When was the last time someone in your organisation showed a genuine interest in your ideas about things the organisation needs to do over the next two to five years to maintain its competitive position?"

"What would they come to me, for? Our State has its three year rolling business plan, and my job is simply to help make it happen. I'm not paid to be an ideas man, if that's what you mean."

This was not said sharply or aggressively, but in the same matter-of-fact, low tone of voice.

My internal dilemma was: How does one constructively reflect back to the man that the reason no-one shows interest in him is that he shows no interest in others, even when they are trying to help him? That the reason be he can't find development needs and opportunities is that he even lost interest in *himself* some time ago..?

Written in bald words, there are a great many presumptions in that speculation of mine. Nonetheless, that's what was going through my mind and that's what prompted me to spend the next half hour trying to get him interested in being interested. I did not feedback my own experience of him, but asked questions like, "If you could change anything in your organisation, what would it be? What really grabs *your* attention these days? If you could do anything, what would it be?" I was aware that he was introverted, in Myers-Briggs terms, and so I was careful not to "put him on the spot" by pressing for immediate answers. I just suggested that these would be questions to

think about. He dutifully wrote them all down.

I made jokes, trying to draw him out, to entertain, divert and engage his interest. I talked a bit about myself and things I had tried to do in the past that were a bit "different". He was polite, he even smiled at my jokes, but he did not offer any more than he had earlier in the conversation.

When I reflected on the conversation later, in my diary, I chastised myself severely. Why didn't I just do what I tell others to do. Meet him where he is, rather than where you wanted him to be? Why didn't I just meet his silence with companionable silence; eventually find a way to reflect back to him my own sense that he was somehow stuck in a rut of his own making? I reminded myself of my own best advice to myself: "all your failures and mistakes stem from a failure to actively listen." My report card at the end of the session read: "must try harder at active listening."

Some time later, I described this encounter to Dominic: "So *why* didn't you listen?" he asked.

"My usual ENTJ stuff. I had a solution, I wanted him to buy it," was my reply.

"Was it that? Surely you can hear yourself doing that now? I thought you were generally very good at putting it "on hold". Was something else going on?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Think back. Play "the tape" over carefully in your mind. What were you thinking and feeling about the others in the group, for instance. And what were they doing while you were talking with him?"

I started to reconstruct the situation in my mind. I became aware that at the time I had felt under some kind of pressure. Pressure to do what? From where? Under pressure from myself to "perform", to establish my credentials in the group as a good facilitator who could quickly get a result. The need to be seen as competent overcoming the disciplined practice of a learned set of skills.

As a matter for my practice, this small example raises several issues. The first and most obvious is to be as fully aware as possible of one's own awareness, at the time. The second one is to have the confidence and patience to sit in a rut with someone else while they fully experience the size and extent of the rut and realise the bit of it they can take responsibility for themselves. The third, as important of the others, it to always pay attention to the effect one is having on the other person. The fourth is to sometimes surface the immediacy of the "here and now" exchange with the other person: What's going on in our conversation? Am I starting to sound like your boss? Do you wish I'd stop fishing around like this and leave you alone? Or more simply, "What is the single most helpful thing I could do for you right now?"

Dominic's intervention with me was the classic third position question: "*Why* do you think you did what you did? Could there be something else at work, something that is so close to you that it escaped your own radar?"

The "something so close" – the personal script – in my case was yet another aspect of preference – the life-long need for competence – and to be seen to be competent – that is part of the ENTI make-up. This aspect of my personal script has frequently triggered dysfunctional behaviour – such as rushing part of a session because some people in the room are expressing the need to "get on with it", whole others are still struggling with the basic ideas. When working with a group of people, I believe that it is essential to acknowledge where everyone is "at", and then encourage the group to do the same and to take responsibility for helping each other. This is difficult to do,

however, if one's personal script says: "You meet all of the needs of all the people yourself, single-handedly."

(The post-script to the incident was that the manager came back to me, privately, about two days later, and said: "I've been thinking about our conversation the other day. You know, I'm really depressed about it. I just seem to be chasing my tail." So we talked about what it felt like to be chasing your own tail.....)

The use of competency is bigger, in fact, than simply one person's personal script. The larger issue is: How do we all get to be competent at this? Our objective was to generate learning about learning, to create learning situations in which people were not dependent on facilitators but could do what we did, whenever they needed to.

There were many aspects of our practice that we believed we needed to "operationalise" – that is, articulate them to the point where others could understand them and, if they had a mind to, practise them for themselves. We thought that this articulation of our tacit knowledge-in-action would be made easier by the fact that we both enjoyed the exploration of theory and could generally explain *why* we did what we did.

We found it much harder to describe what we did than to explain how or why it worked. For instance, I found it much easier, earlier in this chapter, to explain how active listening works than to describe in detail what the doing of it entails. One could not construct a "how to" manual on the basis of what was set out there. Some of our efforts at articulation have borne fruit – as in the description of personal scripts (see Chapter 3), and the development of the diagnostic pyramid (see Chapter 5), and our elaboration of critical incident analysis (see Chapter 2). Our development of an organisational change model and diagnostic techniques associated with that are examples from another part of our practice which is not explored here.

Where the process of articulation has been limited thus far, we have tried to develop some methods of "coaching" or facilitation which are not dissimilar to those described by Schon (1987) and outlined in the previous chapter. The development of these methods has not been in any way a "behind the scenes" activity, since all have been evolved on-the-job, while working with participants.

The one which has been central to my own practice has been the use of what I call structured interactive dialogue where I frequently take one of the parts myself and use the dialogue to both demonstrate and develop skills in listening, immediacy and constructive confrontation. An example of this in action was mentioned in the story headed "Rebecca" earlier in this chapter.

It is not unusual in these dialogues to have several members of the group take turns in being, for example, the listener and the person being listened to. These dialogues are not role-plays: the data or story being told is always genuine and the interaction an authentic attempt at assisting reflection on the data.

One day, Dominic and I, without discussing the matter, instinctively moved into a process called "doubling" in the terminology of Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969). This is useful when a person who is trying to help – or to tell a story – seems "stuck" and unable to continue. Instead of trying to directly process their stuckness, another person sits next to them and for a period of time (seconds or minutes) takes over the task, without any direct discussion with the person for whom they are doubling (or "understudying"). They might, after a time, alternate, with both people periodically taking on the challenge of listening.

The essential point about doubling is that the people involved are trying to behave as one person, so that the person who is being listened to is not having to contend with

two different approaches at once. Doubling means taking over where the previous person left off, trying to carry forward their thinking and action. This technique requires considerable sensitivity, since those doubling must attend to the data being provided by the person they are doubling for and the person being listened to, if listening is the skill being practised.

One might well ask, "How could anyone do it?" and, "Isn't that technique even harder than the original technique they were trying to learn?" The answer is, that is some curious way, having to double makes one instantly alert to anything that makes it hard to "tune in the radio set" (to continue an earlier metaphor) to one's own or others' data. It is impossible to double unless one is in a seemingly paradoxical state of relaxation and alertness that in the martial arts is associated with the state of being "centred". Those who take on the doubling role and find themselves blocked and unable to continue (or even start, in some cases) learn as much or even more, in some ways, as those who do it and do it well. To experience one's own inability to "tune-in" is to start to discover some potential sources of dysfunction in "tuning in" in other settings.

In order to bring the concept to life, I will quote verbatim from part of a session which was tape-recorded (with the consent of all parties) in the context of another program. During this part of the session, one of the participants is trying to surface one of her "mental models" which has to do with the contribution she is making to strategic marketing within her company. I have labelled the statements "NC" (for my own statements), "A" for the person who is trying to clarify her mental models, and "B" for the person who started trying to help her. In this session, I am "doubling" for "B" at intervals.

A: *So I'm not at all at ease with the concept, but I'm not sure how much of it is just my own problem and how much of it would be a legitimate concern for ... you know, anybody at all who is involved.*

B: *You're a bit confused about what's a reasonable reaction and what's you own private "beef".*

A: *Yes, that's right. You know, I've crossed swords with these guys before and every time it's the same. We go through this same thing every time. They've got this thing about a staged roll-out and everyone knows that we're preaching to the converted on this one. I can't see the point of it, and yet everyone in that group is ... like ... highly committed to it. It feels like "the emperor's new clothes" and I'm the only one who can see his dick!*

B: *You must get frustrated when they don't listen to you.*

A: *We can't even have a calm conversation about it. I seem to quickly get into a state where I'm talking against three people and not a lot's productive. That's why I'm starting to wonder if it's just me. No-one else seems to have a problem with it.*

B: *Gee, I don't know what to suggest. Is there anyone else you can talk to?*

A: *Only my husband. I can't really run around in there saying I disagree with the whole marketing strategy for ... (the product brand name).*

B: *Gee, it's pretty ... uh ... tough, eh?"*

A: *It's dumb. I can't work it out.*

Silence for about thirty seconds.

NC: *There seems like no obvious way to deal with this.*

A: *I've run out of ideas completely. I'm going in circles, and I think I'm making a fool of myself.*

NC: *How do you look foolish?*

A: *Oh, you know, it's uh .. it's a bit undignified to be always nagging about something. I feel like I'm nagging.*

NC: *Here comes ..... ("A") harping away again; never gives up; doesn't understand what's involved.*

B: *Pick, pick, pick. Never happy.*

A: *(Laughs) But you'll be sorry you didn't listen to me. I'll have the last laugh. When you've done all that wrong.*

B: *What will you say to us? "I told you so!"?*

A: *It sounds awful but that's exactly what I feel like saying. It sounds like I'm six, doesn't it? Why can't I be more objective about this?*

B: *What would "objective" be like?*

A: *It would be that I could quote some hard data at them, instead of just appealing to ideas. But there isn't any that I can think of.*

B: *That's a pity. None at all?*

A: *None that I know of.*

B: *What a pity.*

Silence again.

A: *Looks like we're back to square one, here.*

B: *For me, too. I don't know what to suggest.*

NC: *You feel pretty passionate about all this, so it would be hard to just walk away and pretend is doesn't matter. What's driving your conviction? What's the data you respond to?*

A: *Oh, it's really, it's just an intuitive feeling that these guys have got to beat up some enthusiasm for what is really a pretty boring product that's on its last legs anyhow, and is really just tiding us over until we're ready to go with the new generation of these. Which won't be before another eighteen months. If they don't do a bit of flag-waving with a new promotion then everyone'll get to see that they aren't doing much else until the new one comes along. But it's just marking time, really. In the meantime, they all get paid. And well paid.*

NC: *For doing.....?*

A: *Sweet F.A. It's pathetic. We only need one of them, not three of them. It's the waste that gets me. I'm not used to spending money like that.*

B: *So you're a bit envious of them?*

A: *Yeah, envious <u>and</u> nagging. Not a pretty picture, is it? Yet, you know, I'm right. If only I could find a way to make those guys acknowledge me.*

NC: *So we're here, in the room. What would you like us to say?*

A: *I'd like you to at least give me a proper hearing, and include me in some of your meetings. I am product liaison, after all.*

NC: *So we're locking you out. Do you know why?*

A: *Because I'm the new girl on the block and you think I don't know the industry.*

B: *Maybe we don't like the way you've raised the issue with us.*

A: *For God's sake, three of you and one of me. What does it take to get a hearing?*

B: *Have you heard us? You want acknowledgment. Have you given it?*

A: *What's to acknowledge?*

B: *Us.*

NC: *The fact that we care about this product and don't want to see it go out with a whimper, not a bang. We feel passionate, too. Maybe passion's getting in the way for all of us?*

A: *You want me to let go of mine?*

NC: *Not necessarily, but perhaps not assume that your's is the only commitment*

that's been made around here.

A: I'll need to think about that.

This is only part of a much longer session, and it demonstrates the use of a form of dialogue made popular by Fritz Perls (1969) among others. By getting into an imaginary dialogue with the other person/people involved in the issue, there is a chance that the assumptions and other underlying elements of the personal script will be surfaced.

I'm conscious that Dominic himself isn't much revealed in this account. There are no pronouncements or bits of wisdom; just lots of effort, learning to "read" each other at critical moments, to make the facilitation appear seamless, to move as one person. In fact, that's just how its been: an exercise in doubling. Thanks, Dominic.

Summary

This story has been included because it illustrates the way in which practice comes to be developed from knowing-in-action to a more articulated and explicit knowingness. Dominic and I just "did" doubling without previous discussion about it or any awareness that that's what would happen. At the time, we didn't have a label for it, although the writer recognised it when re-visiting the Gestalt literature at a later point.

"Doubling" as a technique also provides a nice illustration of the skill required to track data and one's own awareness at three or four different levels:

- awareness of the data coming from inside oneself;

- awareness of the data coming from the other person (the one being "helped");

- awareness of the data coming from the person with whom one is doubling;

- awareness of the data being generated by the interaction of all three people.

The first part of the story also includes an example of a personal script in action and how lack of awareness of that script on the facilitator's part produced "stuckness" for her and reinforced the "stuckness" of the person she was trying to help.

Chapter 5: Integration and a meeting with "old friends"

Introduction and overview

The intention of the previous chapter was to show something of how one aspect of this writer's praxis was developed, over a period of years, by engagement in the kind of reflection that arises directly out of action, reading and sustained dialogue with others.

In this chapter, the writer tracks the final (at least "final" to the time of writing!) development of the writer's understanding of reflection-based learning.

The chapter follows this sequence:

- a summary of the integration of theory and practice achieved to the end of Chapter 4;

- a description of the next "great leap forward" in the development of the writer's understanding stimulated by the work of Gendlin (1970); that work is offered as a potential source of explanation of the process of reflective learning; similarly, Rogers' (1961) model of the way in which individuals can learn about and recreate aspects of themselves is offered as an elegant description of the process of reflective learning-in-action which also captures the essence of the present writer's "knowing-in-action";

- a description of how the great leap forward was tested and challenged.

Summary of integration of theory and practice to this point

The writer will begin this section by offering a summary of the point her understanding

had reached towards the end of the activities described in the last chapter.

She had come to believe that in an age of discontinuity, the kinds of learning and change processes required of individuals call for the capability to reflect not only on tasks and environments and opportunities "out there", but on one's own behaviour as well, including the factors which drive our actions, albeit in ways that we are not always aware of. She had come to value "third position" reflection as a perspective from which one can try to "see oneself" in action and to understand the impact and causes of that action. She came to appreciate the significance of Demmings' remark (1982) that nothing happens without personal transformation.

She had defined reflection as being about "sense-making" – making the transition from tacit practice, skill and knowledge to explicit acknowledgment, naming and framing of those things. She had seen the application of words, pictures, metaphors and other symbols in sense-making as being as important in the development of self-understanding as it is in the development of praxis.

In her search for appropriate methodologies, she had wanted to develop her own understanding (and practice) of the reflective practitioner, who uses reflection to assist useful learning and change in self and others. She agreed with Martin (1993, p81) that in order to:

> catalyse change, I would have to see beyond cognitive instruction, beyond studies and presentation, to a process of learning more subtle and compassionate than anything I and most of my colleagues in the profession have practised up to now ... the key to the process is self-examination.

She experienced the wisdom of the Gestalt cycle of awareness, seeing in it a map of all the different facets of the reflective act – awareness, feeling, understanding, intent, action and withdrawal. She accepted the completeness of the cycle, carrying with it the implication that experience – however intense, however deeply "felt", or however

mechanical, automatic and repetitive – remains essentially tacit and "unknowable" by self and others unless brought into a cognitive (symbolic) awareness, where it can be acknowledged, "made sense of", shared, enhanced, accepted or opened up to further testing and change by the individual.

She also must declare a concern with approaches to individual and collective learning which suggest that people can somehow, through logic, interrogation, force or persuasion, be quickly confronted with the powerful internal drivers of behaviour (call them mental models, personal scripts or what you will) and be successfully invited to change them. Rather, she saw the surfacing of mental models or personal scripts as being, in Martin's words, an act that is subtle, compassionate, involving lightness of touch, profound respect for the individual and a preparedness and ability to read, accept and meet the other person (or oneself, if one's own self is the focus) where they are, not where, in fantasy, one would like them to be.

The view of personal change arising from Gestalt therapy became an important focus for this writer. She accepted the proposition – and paradox – that one can change only when one is truly oneself, that when we become aware of ourselves at any point in time and fully acknowledge, know, make sense of our "stuckness" and what we really are doing (in Gestalt terms), we open the possibility of making changes. She became keen to learn, enhance, operationalise and share the skills involved in creating that state of self-awareness which Gestalt therapy identifies with readiness for change.

As her head developed understanding of the skills, her practice led her to experience these skills in action, to experience the act of engagement with another as being one of intense concentration, but ultimately one requiring one to have enormous sensitivity, care ("you have to love them": the concept of unconditional positive regard) and timing.

The literature of Gestalt therapy was visited – and in some cases, re-visited – with more thoroughness than is probably reflected in the thesis. It was this literature that clarified for the writer the concept that "knowingness" or the development of meaning implies both being close to that which one seeks to make sense of (even becoming part of it or at one with it in terms of experience) and distancing oneself from it (seeing it in the context of its impact on others and on the self): in Gestalt terms, focussing on both the figure and the ground of the emerging Gestalten (Korb, Gorrell & de Reit, 1989).

In order to further enhance her understanding and practice, this writer re-visited the counselling literature and both read about and practised the skills involved in using dialogue not to get where "I" *want* to be, but where "you" *are*: the skills of attending and active listening, of being intensely aware of one's own internal data and personal scripts, as well as the data being generated by the other person, and by the interaction between self and others. She appreciated that this kind of attending to and active acknowledgment of self and others is in itself a profoundly reflective act, requiring both closeness to (immersion in) and distance from the data of the emerging Gestalten. She experienced the extraordinary challenge of matching one's own responses to those of an other person's as one engages with them – so that interaction sometimes has the lightness of touch that is like (metaphorically speaking) the tenderness of a caress, and at other times involves a more "rough and tumble" kind of dialogue or a dialogue that is like playfulness. She and a colleague attempted the challenging task of working in tandem, through "doubling", and the disciplines associated with that work.

She experienced the challenge of trying to tune into all of one's own data and engaging all of one's self – head, heart, senses and imagination in MBTI terms, the finely honed and adjusted functions of the dominant and auxiliary self, and the uncalibrated and less comfortable functions of the shadow side of self (Jung, 1933).

She came to appreciate the fine line between acceptance and collusion – the moment at

which the facilitator can usefully re-frame the data, or the sense that is being made of it, in ways that help the other to gain the deepest levels of insight into self that open up new and significant possibilities for change.

She learned that being attentive to the data requires a non-heroic orientation, an interest in "bending low to the ground" to experience what seems ordinary and of no importance. She learned that the arts of story telling and listening to stories, of writing and reading stories (experiences) in journals, are a powerful trigger for insight and action. And that the process of reflection is enhanced by the use of metaphor, myth and picture which applies existing wisdom to new situations by its capacity to re-frame what the data suggests and re-invent our capacity for dealing with it.

There were lessons to be learned about the impasse which individuals and teams sometimes get to, unable to move back or forward but "stuck"; and the Gestalt notion of a cycle of attention, energy, engagement and withdrawal which can be interrupted (resulting in "stuckness") at different points, but which demands an even greater need to meet the person or group where they actually are, and to avoid the traps of prematurely "moving them on". The writer understood that "stuckness" can sometimes look like skilled behaviour, but that on closer examination it is more like "skilled incompetence" (Argyris, 1991) that is not only dysfunctional but seals over the possibility of any acknowledgment of its dysfunctional character. She experienced at first hand Senge's (1990) observation that when one prematurely pushes a well-organised but dysfunctional system of behaviour (whether individual or collective), the system (person, team, organisation) pushes back even harder.

And the writer learned, or course, that reflection and the sense-making it produces, continually needs to be carried forward into action, where "sense" is tested, confirmed, modified, enriched, extended, challenged or changed.

These ideas or "themes" of the writer represent the kind of insight that emerges from sustained self-reflection on one's own behaviour and practice as well as bringing together of a number of strands of other people's thinking and practice. The process of bringing together and integrating ideas and practice was messy, non-linear, both a source of misery and a source of exhilaration. And at the end of the day, she is conscious that even after all the words are on the page, after every effort has been made to articulate and operationalise what was formerly elusive and tacit, sometimes a small hard core of complexity remains, something which requires the touch of a master craftsman or artist, and which can only be witnessed or felt, but not described or explained.

The writer once had the experience of watching and experiencing Zurko Moreno (the wife of J.L. Moreno, to whom is attributed the invention of the concepts of sociometry, psychodrama, socio-drama and role-play) work with two hundred people in the creation of a meaningful piece of psychodramatic work. The skill with which she engaged her own intuition and imagination, as well as the intuition of others, in creating and reading the data of interaction defies description.

Schon (1987) has suggested (see Chapter 3) there are areas of "knowing-in-action" that are in any event very difficult to articulate, and which are accessed by the "feel" or experience of actually doing whatever it is.

The writer's "great leap forward" in the development of her understanding

Nonetheless, this writer's "need to know" and to articulate her understanding did result in a further – and major – step in the development of her understanding.

She was aware, at this point in the journey, of being "on the brink" of some further insight into the whole business of reflection. It would be misleading to describe this as

an orderly and logical development of a train of thought. It was more as though a major bit of the jigsaw suddenly fell into place. In this section, the writer attempts to track how this came about and the substance and significance of this latest development in her understanding. She begins by continuing the description of the core ingredients in Gestalt thinking.

For the Gestalt therapist, the target for change is not the problem presented by the person. Rather, the therapist observes the person as he or she describes the problem and looks for the underlying process (or personal script, to use the writer's own term) by which the person maintains the state of confusion, or impasse ("stuckness"), uncertainty, disempowerment or lack of perceived competence which they – or others – are aware of. Korb et al (1989, p71) describe the therapeutic stance as being one in which all one does is attend, and attempt to discover what the person is *DOING*. This will be as interesting or more interesting than the *CONTENT* of what the person is saying. *"DOING"* includes how the person is sitting, breathing, obvious tensions about their body, how they are speaking, voice tone, speech patterns, gestures. One cannot attend to all of these things, simultaneously, but as attention is maintained, some feature (figure) stands out from the ground of the Gestalt, and the processes which exhibit what the person is doing become apparent. If no clues of process emerge from the person's presence alone, or how they express themselves, one will generally discover what the person is *DOING* within the situation they are describing.

It is not enough, however, for the facilitator or helper to notice what the client is doing: the client must notice it and experience it, too. In fact, the invitation offered by the Gestalt therapist to the client is to work through the cycle of interaction between oneself and one's environment that was described in Chapter 4 during the account of the encounter with Alan. This cycle describes a flow and ebb of energy as the individual becomes progressively aware of sensation, attaches feeling and meaning (symbolic understanding) to it, mobilises their intentions toward it, takes action which results in

full contact with and experience of the situation, leading to satisfaction and withdrawal.

For the Gestalt therapist, it is not enough for the person to make sense of their situation, to complete the cycle; they must say, do, or feel whatever is necessary for the unfinished business to be finished. As Korb et al (1989, p72) point out, Gestalt therapy is an existential therapy, not simply a verbal or interpretive one. The person is facilitated in saying clearly what needs to be said, not to any real person in his or her life, but to his or her image of that person; but talking per se is not enough: the person is facilitated in allowing himself or herself to experience whatever feeling, thoughts, or actions have been blocked, at whatever stage of the cycle they have been blocked, thus completing the complete cycle of the Gestalt.

In terms of application to practice, these ideas have the potential to push the writer's practice to the limit of her skill. Not only can the search for sense-making become an essentially cognitive act for this writer (and therefore, potentially, for her clients also) with feelings left out of the picture altogether, but in her experience it takes real skill to meet people wherever they happen to be in the cycle (which might be before or after the point at which "sense-making" is important); it takes even more skill and patience to avoid the trap of trying to move them on before they are ready (i.e. before they have experienced and acknowledged for themselves where they are up to). The capacity to do this implies considerable sensitivity and flexibility in the facilitator's own repertoire. If the facilitator is "stuck" in any part of the cycle herself, she will find it potentially difficult to work effectively with someone who is "stuck" somewhere else.

The challenging questions of how do I do all this in practice? and how do I facilitate it effectively? will be picked up again in the next section of this chapter. For the moment, the writer will concentrate on the leap forward in her understanding. Because the Gestalt cycle did trigger a leap forward in the development of that understanding. The Gestalt cycle potentially offers us a description of how reflection works – the full cycle

of connection with awareness, feeling, understanding and action. But it doesn't tell us why it works.

This issue takes us into a different plane in the consideration of reflection. We are contemplating not just how reflection works (a description of the process) but why it works (explanation). Most of what has been contained in this thesis so far could be described as description of reflection at work – in research, in learning, in theory and in practice. So far, there has been no attempt at explanation. Explanation is not only important for its own sake, as representing a higher order of thinking about the phenomenon in question, but because in thinking about the explanation we might get some clues about how to make our processes work more effectively. In this specific instance, it might also be helpful because what we are doing seems so inherently complex: trying to find useful ways to think about ourselves so that we can develop, learn or change some part of what we do.

In her search for explanation, this writer returned to a work she had first read over twenty years before: Gendlin's (1970) *A Theory of Personality Change*. Gendlin (1970) commented over twenty five years ago that we lack a theory of experience, while Bergin (1970) commented that we need a methodology for introspection. While Gendlin and Bergin were reacting to an American behaviourist tradition which had effectively banned the contents of subjective experience from the practice of psychology (defined as a science), arguably not much has changed since then. We still lack agreed methodologies which can be readily accessed by those interested in self-reflection of the kind which comes from "third position", and which addresses what this writer has called "personal scripts".

Gendlin (1970) has offered a model of what might be happening which is helpful and on which others can readily build. He differentiates three elements in the process of human experience: that which is unconscious or outside of immediate awareness

(although it may once have been in awareness), that which is in our awareness but which has not been symbolised by us, and that which has been symbolised in words or pictures.

He suggests that a great deal of our day-to-day experiencing is within our awareness but is "tacit" in the sense that no verbal or other symbols have been attached to it. He calls this kind of experience "felt meaning", and includes in it the inward sense of our body, its tension, its well-being. It is essentially sensory, visceral, intuitive – and sometimes – emotional experience. Before symbolisation, these "felt" meanings are tacit, implicit, incomplete, pre-conceptual, awaiting the attachment of symbols, which can "organise" or "make sense" of them in many different ways. In the tradition of existential thinking, our feelings are "possibilities", possible actions in the world.

Because felt meanings are incomplete, to say that something is *tacit* does not mean that it is in the same form as explicit, only hidden. It means that it is not yet formed, and therefore amenable to many different ways of being formed. Explicit meanings are not hidden conceptual units, waiting to be discovered – they are created at the moment when that which is tacit is formed and completed by the attachment of symbols.

When symbols are attached to them, our felt meanings – which can include perceptions, judgements, wishes, intentions and feelings – take a new, completed form. This notion of completion sits well with the Gestalt awareness cycle (see Figure 3) and its notion of non-interrupted contact and engagement with each stage in the cycle.

When this explanatory model is applied to the process of reflection, we can make more sense of (reflect more deeply upon) that act. Gendlin suggests, for example, that in the process of reflection we are searching around for ways of satisfactorily completing our felt (unsymbolised) meanings. When we find this completion, by the attachment of the written word or other symbol, meaning has become different but explicit.

While there are many potential ways of completing felt meanings, in practice, Gendlin suggests, only a relatively few will actually complete the meaning in a way that feels satisfactory to their owner:

> ... recall how often ... the client struggles for the exactly right way to stating something he feels. Many statements may be rejected as "not quite it", even though conceptually they seem to be the same as what he finally asserts is "exactly it". That exactly right statement has a powerful experiential effect. The person may visibly relax, exhale deeply, and feel released and deeply relieved, often despite the fact that the statement asserts something awful... Not any and all concepts or words will do. Only exactly these words have this effect of experiential movement (Gendlin, 1970, p79).

Without this act of connection and completion, words are not useful. We call it rationalising or intellectualising or externalising if an individual talks and explains without the direct participation of his ongoing felt meaning (his experience); we say that the person is "disconnected".

When connection and completion are effected, the person's experience, in Gendlin's model, is carried forward and changed.

> Rogers at first found that even if the therapist did nothing more than to rephrase the client's communication – that is to say, if the therapist clearly showed that he was receiving and exactly understanding the client's moment-by-moment communications – a very deep and self-propelled change process began and continued in the client. Something happens ... when he is understood in this way. Some change takes place in what he momentarily confronts. Something releases. He then has something else, further, to say; and if this, again, is received and understood, something still further emerges which the individual would not even have thought of (nor was capable of thinking), has not such a sequence of expressions and responses taken place.
>
> Rogers next found that if he aimed to conceptualise exactly what the client now wishes to communicate, and if he kept this aim visible and known to the client *(writer's note: this last is the part of the process of immediacy described earlier in this chapter)*, he could formulate the client's present message much more deeply and accurately than the client had done. Perhaps the client gave a long series of externalised reports of the incidents and his generally angry reactions. The therapist, after listening, could sense what I now call the felt meaning. Thus, in response to some long situational reports the therapist might say, "It frightens you to think that you are helpless when that sort of thing happens."

> Rogers found that, while interpretations, deductions, and conceptual explanations were useless and usually resisted, the *exact* referring to the client's own momentarily felt meaning was almost always *welcome* to the client and seemed to release him into deeper and further self-expression and awareness (Gendlin, 1970, p136).

According to Gendlin, the process of completing felt meanings is simply that – an ongoing process of interaction between felt experiencing and symbols. It is not one of finding an explicit meaning which directly equates to an implicit or tacit one. Completion is – paradoxically – a creative act, not one of "matching", because the act of completion not only forms or adds something that was not there before, it creates new possibilities for feeling, symbolising and acting. At the same time, much of our experiencing is essentially an ongoing *interaction* between feeling and symbols.

In tracking how the individual makes conceptual sense of (develops verbal concepts to describe) their own experience, we are not tracking the conceptual connection of one set of symbols (words or constructs) with another. Between each concept, there is an intervening step(s) during which the symbol completes a felt meaning, thus creating the possibility of a new symbolic connection which does not just flow "logically" from the previous symbol but from the possibilities inherent in the felt meaning.

This contrasts with other thinking processes, when we move directly from concept to concept by conceptual implication. This is likely to be the character of our thinking when we are engaging with abstract ideas or things that are not part of our immediate sensing. Gendlin's essential point is an interesting one -that if we are interested in *personal change*, it can only happen through an interaction involving symbols and the "felt meaning" element in personal experience.

This writer finds Gendlin's model as stimulating in 1994 as she did in 1974, obviously because it connects, as a set of symbols, with some of her own felt meanings! It certainly helps, however, to explain why some of the techniques described in the next

section actually work. Take, for example, the process of *focussing* in which the facilitator attempts to add value to the other person's efforts to interpret or make sense of their experience, by being increasingly concrete and specific about the content of what is being communicated; or by incrementally adding meaning to what has been acknowledged or recognised by the other person; or by being immediate about the interaction between the facilitator and the other person.

Focussing is a continuous process in which symbols interact more and more helpfully with felt meaning. Attentive focussing thus makes it possible for an individual to surface and make sense of feelings which were previously embarrassing, confusing, ambiguous, unfocused, but *real*: "I know it makes no sense, but I think I'm actually frightened of her." Combined with *respect*, focussing makes it easier for the individual to get past his or her own defence mechanisms and attempt some rough conceptualisation of what's going on at the level of felt meaning. (We talk about people "getting in touch" with themselves.) In the manner that Rogers describes (1961), while the concept might be foggy, the feeling (not necessarily emotion) that triggered it might be experienced much more directly, without being suppressed or filtered out.

As felt meaning becomes sharper, the anxiety or discomfort often associated with being "touchy-feely" often diminishes or disappears. Felt (aware) experience becomes more acceptable and though unpleasant at times, the experience of experiencing it is itself a source of anxiety. At this stage, symbolising might be very inadequate, the person might talk about "feeling like this", or "it", when talking about their own experience, but they are now talking about it.

Gendlin describes several phases in the process of focussing, such as "unfolding", when we might have both cognitive and emotional recognition of the "good sense" of our previously unidentified and irksome feelings. "Of course", we say over and over, "Of course". During unfolding:

> a whole vast multiplicity of implicit aspects in the person's functioning and dysfunctioning is always involved. For, when a direct referent of experiencing "opens up", much more change has occurred than the cognitive realisation of this or that. This is most dramatically evident when, after the "unfolding", the individual still sees no way out. He says, "At least I know what it is now, but how will I ever change or deal with it?" Yet, during the following days ... it turns our that he is already different, that the quality of the problem has changed, and his behaviour has been different. And, as for a good explanation of all this resolution ... "well, it just seems all right now." There is a global change in the whole manner of experiencing in this regard ... only sometimes does *what* is unfolded lead to a solution in an explicable way. More often, deep global feeling change occurs as one unfolds the direct referent, even when it seems to open into something which sounds worse and more hopeless than one had expected. Whether or not some specific resolution is noticeable, the change appears to be broad and global. It is not just this problem resolved, or that trait changed, but a change in many areas and respects. We can say that the broad multiplicity of aspects which are implicit in any felt meaning are all of them changed – thus the global change. Or we can say that meanings are aspects of the experiencing process and that the very *manner* of experiencing changes, hence also the quality of all of its meanings (Gendlin, 1970, p146).

In this passage, the writer believes that Gendlin has offered an explanatory framework which elegantly ties together all the "bits" of her emerging personal understanding or theory: the power of attending behaviour; the paradox of change (to "move on" in understanding one must first "go in" to self and experience); the concept of leverage (small subtle changes in personal scripts which have "global" consequences); the importance of the act of reflection itself, as a means of developing meaning and transforming that which was tacit into the explicit; and the value of metaphor as a profoundly enriching element in symbolisation.

Gendlin has much more to say which this writer finds profoundly "sense-making": for example, his descriptions of immediacy, of presentness, of the "richness of fresh detail" (when we reframe, re-symbolise, felt meaning that had previously locked us into dysfunctional patterns of behaviour, including interaction with others that failed to attend to all the detail inherent in the situation, that diminished both parties because it left out very many facets of the other person and the uniqueness of our interaction). He describes the "re-constituting" of experience which had previously been pushed outside

awareness (through denial, repression, disconnection). When individuals are able to glimpse, re-constitute and then *carry forward* their own, previously disconnected or unacknowledged, felt meaning, without reliance on interaction with others, and when that felt meaning relates to themselves, they are engaging in the ultimate in third position reflection, what Isaacs (1993) called self-reflective "triple-loop learning".

If a thesis can be said to have a "high point" in its manufacture, then this is that point: a sense, for the writer, that we have finally got to the heart of the matter, laid bare the thinking and the thinking behind the thinking. The writer has come full circle from 1974 to 1994 and back again. In T.S. Eliot's words: "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." It would be tempting to put aside the pen at this moment, and say "there it is". However, there is more.

<u>How the "great leap forward" included another leap backwards: the contribution of Carl Rogers</u>

It will have become apparent, from reading the previous section, that in order to take a "great leap forward" in her understanding, this writer had to take a leap backwards in time to re-visit, re-discover – and for the first time, perhaps, really understand – the wisdom from the counselling literature which she had been exposed to in the course of completing her Master's Degree in Occupational Psychology in the mid 1970's. This re-visiting of “old friends” in the literature not only refreshed and enriched her thinking, but made her aware of how little of this wisdom had actually been understood and effectively integrated into her practice at the time when it was first encountered.

Rogers' (1961) description of the way in which individuals can insightfully learn about and recreate aspects of themselves was particularly interesting to read, since his articulation of the key stages in the development of self-awareness, experience and

behaviour marries up very well with the explanatory theory offered by Gendlin (1970).

Rogers brings to life and describes what is happening to the individual as he or she moves through the psychological change process which Gendlin subsequently tried to explain. The present writer suggests that in doing this, Rogers also provides us with an articulate description of what happens as one moves progressively through deeper stages of reflection upon self. In reading the words of Rogers again, after so long an interval, she was struck by how powerfully and accurately Rogers captures and makes explicit aspects of her own knowing-in-action which had remained tacit.

Rogers (1961, pp132-155) describes the stages in the change process in the following way. In the first stage there is an unwillingness to communicate about self; communication is only about things external to self. As a result, feelings and personal meanings are neither recognised nor owned, and personal constructs (to borrow Kelly's (1955) helpful term) are extremely rigid. At this stage close and communicative dialogue is construed as irrelevant or even dangerous; no problems are recognised or perceived; there is no desire to change; and there is much blockage of internal communication.

In the second stage, expression begins to flow more freely in regard to non-self topics; but problems are still perceived as external to self and there is no sense of personal responsibility in problems. Feelings are described in such a way that the person doesn't "own" them (may talk about "what happens to you" when they mean "what happens to me"; or may talk about feelings as though they were objects in the past. When feelings are exhibited, they are not recognised as such. Experiencing is bound by the structure of the past, making it difficult for the person to experience something new or unfamiliar. The person finds it difficult to differentiate personal meanings and feelings except in very limited and global ways; contradictions may be expressed, but with little recognition of them as contradictions.

In the third stage there is freer flow of expression about the self as an object, and much more expression about or description of feelings and personal meanings occurring in the past. However, there is still very little acceptance of feelings; for the most part feelings are revealed as something shameful, bad, or abnormal, or unacceptable in other ways. When feelings are exhibited they are sometimes recognised as feelings at the time; however, most experiencing is described as in the past, or as somewhat remote from the self. While personal constructs remain rigid, they may be recognised as constructs, not external facts. Similarly differentiation of feelings and meanings is slightly sharper and less global, than in previous stages, and contradiction in experiences may be recognised; however, personal choices are often seen as ineffective.

In the fourth stage the person describes more intense feelings of the "not-now-present" variety; and more feelings are experienced in the immediate present, sometimes breaking through almost against the client's wishes, and there is distrust and fear of this when it happens. There is still little open acceptance of feelings, but experiencing is less bound by the structure of the past, is less remote, and may occasionally occur with little postponement. There is a loosening in the way experience is construed; there are some discoveries of personal constructs; there is the definite recognition of some of these as constructs; and there is a beginning questioning of their validity. Feelings, constructs, personal meanings are increasingly differentiated with some tendency toward seeking exactness of symbolisation. Concerns about contradictions and incongruence between experience and self are acknowledged and there are feelings of self responsibility in problems, though such feelings vacillate. Though close dialogue still seems dangerous, the person risks him or herself, relating to some small extent on a feeling basis.

In the fifth stage, feelings are expressed freely as in the present; and are very close to being fully experienced; they "bubble up", "seep through" in spite of the fear and

distrust which the person feels at experiencing them with fullness and immediacy. Although there is surprise and fright, rarely pleasure, at the feelings which "bubble" through, there is an increasing ownership of self-feelings, and a desire to be these, to be the "real me". Experiencing is loosened, no longer remote, and frequently occurs with little postponement. The ways in which experience is construed are much loosened; there are many fresh discoveries of personal constructs as constructs; and a critical examination and questioning of these. There is a strong and evident tendency toward exactness in differentiation of feelings and meanings; and an increasingly clear facing of contradictions and inconsistencies in experience. There is an increasing quality of acceptance of self-responsibility for problems being faced, and a concern as to how far he/she has contributed; there are increasingly freer dialogues within the self, and improvement in and reduced blockage of internal communication.

In the sixth stage, a feeling which has previously been "stuck", has been inhibited in its process quality, is experienced with immediacy now. A feeling flows to its full result, and a present feeling is directly experienced with immediacy and richness. This immediacy of experiencing, and the feeling which constitutes its content, are accepted; this is not something which is to be denied, feared or struggled against. Self as an object tends to disappear, and experiencing, at this stage, takes on a real process quality. The incongruence between experience and awareness is vividly experienced as it disappears into congruence. Differentiation of experiencing is sharp and basic; and in this stage, there are no longer "problems", external or internal; the client is living, subjectively, a phase of his problem, it is not an object.

In the seventh stage, new feelings are experienced with immediacy and richness of detail, both in the helping relationship and outside. There is a growing and continuing sense of acceptant ownership of these changing feelings, a basic trust in his/her own process. Experiencing has lost almost completely its structure-bound aspects and become process experiencing – that is, the situation is experienced and interpreted in its

newness, not in the past. The self becomes increasingly simply the subjective and reflexive awareness of experiencing; the self is much less frequently a perceived object and much more frequently something confidently felt in process. Personal constructs are tentatively reformulated, to be validated against further experience, but even then, to be held loosely. Internal communication is clear, with feelings and symbols well matched, and fresh terms for new feelings. There is the experiencing of effective choice of new ways of being.

While some (for example, Schein, 1993) would undoubtedly be uncomfortable with the focus of this statement on the accessing of emotions, and while the present writer's practice could not be described as intensively therapeutic in a clinical sense, she believes that these words of Rogers provide us with a good working description of what is potentially involved when nice, "normal" people engage in the kind of self-reflection which has the power to question deeply entrenched personal scripts, including the self-sealing defensive routines described so eloquently by Argyris (1991).

<u>The development of technique: finding out more about how others do it and experiencing a praxis challenge</u>

A key practice challenge for the present writer, arising from the "great leap forward", is to take models and explanations of reflective learning – and how to facilitate it – developed in the context of therapeutic work (the Gestaltists, Gendlin & Rogers (1961)) and apply them in the context of management development which is not happening in a therapeutic context.

While convinced – both intellectually and through experience – of the relevance of these frameworks in facilitating deep levels of reflection, the writer has been a little disconcerted by the fact that she had reached back so far into the historical literature to help develop her own understanding, practice and praxis.

Moreover, as already suggested in Chapter 3, she was a little concerned by a paucity of detailed references to these frameworks in the more recent literature on the techniques used to facilitate reflection, inquiry and dialogue of the kind acknowledged to be important in generative learning.

At the risk of seeming to retreat yet again into the literature, the writer believes it is important to do so, for two reasons: firstly, because that is what she did in reality, and this is an account of what really happened; and secondly, because in re-visiting the literature, the writer's thinking was given a bit of a jolt. At this point, the literature provided a test and a challenge to both understanding and practice.

To begin with, the return to the contemporary literature was, if anything, comforting and stimulating. As also reported in Chapter 3, many writers and practitioners are convinced of the importance of generative learning and in the techniques – including reflection – needed to produce it. Thus Isaacs remarks:

> Given the nature of global and institutional problems, thinking alone at whatever level of leadership is no longer adequate. The problems are too complex, the interdependencies too intricate, and the consequences of isolation and fragmentation too devastating. Human beings everywhere are being forced to develop their capacity to think together – to develop collaborative thought and coordinated action... According to Alan Webber, former editor of the Harvard Business Review, conversation is the means by which people share and often develop what they know. He says that the most important work in the new economy is creating conversation (Isaacs, 1993, p24).

Dialogue is defined by Isaacs as:

> a discipline of collective thinking and inquiry, a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it... As people learn to perceive, to inquire into, and allow transformation of the ... patterns of individual thinking and acting ... they may discover entirely new levels of insight and forge substantive and, at times, dramatic changes in behaviour (Isaacs, 1993, p25).

He observes that our standard way of thinking suggests that co-ordinated action occurs when different people reach a shared agreement and then create a plan of action. Dialogue suggests that some kinds of co-ordinated action do not require this sort of rational planning at all.

> In fact, some of the most powerful forms of co-ordination may come through participation in unfolded meaning, which might even be perceived differently by different people. A flock of birds suddenly taking flight from a tree reveals the potential co-ordination of dialogue: this is movement all at once, a wholeness and listening together that permits individual differentiation but is still highly inter-connected (Isaacs, 1993, p25).

Isaacs observes that dialogue comes from two Greek roots, *dia* and *logos*, suggesting "meaning flowing through". He defines dialogue as *a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties* that comprise *everyday* experience. In dialogue, people gradually learn to suspend their defensive exchanges and further, to probe into the underlying reasons for why those exchanges exist. This probing into defences is not the central purpose of a dialogue session:

> the central purpose is simply to establish a field of genuine meeting and inquiry, a setting in which people can allow a free flow of meaning and vigorous exploration of the collective background of their thought, their personal predisposition, the nature of their shared attention, and the rigid features of their individual and collective assumptions. The practice of dialogue may require us, however, to focus on uncovering and inquiring into the feedback loop between our internal interpretive structures (our tendency to name events in certain ways) which then influence the world and (eventually) our internal structures (Isaacs, 1993, p31).

Isaacs suggests that successful dialogue not only generates double-loop learning ("What are alternate ways of seeing this situation that could free me to act more effectively?") but triple-loop learning which generates the question: "What is leading me and others to have a predisposition to learn in this way at all? Why these goals?" Isaacs puts the proposition that the mindfulness embodied in dialogue that generates triple-loop learning:

> involves awareness of the living experience of thinking, not reflection after the fact about it. For us to gain insight into the nature of our tacit thought, we must

> somehow learn to watch or experience it, in action. This work would require a form of collective attention and learning. Dialogue's purpose is to create a setting where conscious collective mindfulness can be maintained (Isaacs, 1993, p31).

The present writer finds a great similarity between the process of reflection on thinking described here and the process of development of reflection on self quoted at length from Rogers (1961) in the previous section of this chapter.

All of this requires, as Isaacs concedes, a new mode of paying attention, to be able to perceive, as they arise, the assumptions which are taken for granted, the flow of the polarisation of opinions, the rules for acceptable and unacceptable conversation, and the methods for managing differences.

Isaacs' own advice is to suspend assumptions and uncertainties; observe the observer; listen to your listening; slow down the inquiry; be aware of thought, and befriend polarisation.

He also offers us a model for the development of "cool inquiry", which entails the conscious creation of environments or "containers" which define the field of inquiry. The first container asks that people not only participate in inquiry and debate, but observe and reflect on the kinds of conversations they are having. There is no attempt to change those conversations, simply to observe them.

The second container asks that people explore the range of assumptions that are brought into the inquiry and debate. They are asked to evaluate them, to see the issues as being not simply "out there" but something that they have created themselves. They might be asked to produce a map of their conflict, and to invent some collective and personal "rules" for dialogue.

The result, in Isaacs' words, is that people may then avoid taking an internal "role" about any position; for example, not panic and withdraw, not choose to fight, not categorise things as "this" or "that" but listen and inquire, "What is the meaning of this?" They do not listen just to each other, but to themselves. They ask: "Where am I listening from? What is the disturbance going on in me (and others)? What can I learn if I slow things down and inquire (to seek within)?"

The third container produces a "cool" environment in which people inquire together as a whole, applying their "rules".

> Inquiry within this phase of the container is subtle, people here can become sensitive to the cultural "programs" for thinking and acting that they have unwittingly accepted as true... While people participate, they also begin to watch the session in a new way... People become sensitive to the ways in which the conversation is affecting all the participants in the group. In particular, they can begin to look for the embodied manifestations of their thoughts... This phase can be playful and penetrating. Yet is also leads to another crisis. People ... come to understand and feel the impact that holding fragmented ways of thinking has had on them, their organisations, and their culture. They sense their separateness. While people may understand intellectually that they have had limits to their vision, they may not yet have experienced the fact of their isolation. Such awareness brings pain – both from loss of comforting beliefs and from the exercise of new cognitive and emotional muscles (Isaacs, 1993, p37).

The fourth container, which is reached if the previous crisis can be navigated, opens up a new level of awareness. Isaacs is quoted in full here:

> People begin to know consciously that they are participating in a pool of common meaning because they have sufficiently explored each other's views. They still may not agree, but their thinking takes on an entirely different rhythm and pace. At this point, the distinction between memory and thinking becomes apparent. People may find it hard to talk together using the rigid categories of previous understanding. The net of their existing thought is not fine enough to begin to capture the subtle and delicate understandings that begin to emerge. This too may be familiar or disorienting. People may find that they do not have adequate words and fall silent. Yet the silence is not an empty void, but one replete with richness. Rumi, a 13th century Persian poet, captures this experience:
>
> Out beyond ideas of rightdoing
> and wrongdoing

> There is a field
>
> I will meet you there
>
> When the soul lies down in that grass
> The world is too full to talk about
>
> In this experience, the world is too full to talk about; too full to use language to analyse it. Yet words can also be evocative, creating narratives that convey richness of meaning. Though we may have few words for such experiences, dialogue raises the possibility of speech that clothes subtle meaning instead of words merely pointing towards it. I call this kind of experience "metalogue" or "meaning flowing with". Metalogue reveals a conscious, intimate, and subtle relationship between the structure and content of an exchange and its meaning. The medium and the message are linked: Information from the process conveys as much meaning as the content of the words exchanged. The group does not "have" meaning, in other words, it <u>is</u> its meaning. This kind of exchange entails learning to think and speak together for the creation of break-through levels of thought, and to know the aesthetic beauty of shared speech. Such loosening of rigid thought patterns frees energy that now permits new levels of intelligence and creativity in the container (Isaacs, 1993, p38).

This is tantalising stuff – and to the present writer, bewitching in the prospect it offers. Although not having the same eloquence with words, she can identify with the picture Isaacs paints, glimpse it through the trees and even make associations to large and small group experiences she has had herself.

Isaacs, however, is very light on for detail as to how this state of dialogue is achieved, although he does refer at a couple of points to the need for superb facilitation skills. We are left to guess at the process through which these containers are created and the skills used to enact them by the individuals who make up the group.

Like Isaacs, Schein (1993, p42) is in no doubt about the need for dialogue, suggesting that all problem-solving groups should begin in a dialogue format to facilitate the building of sufficient common ground and mutual trust, and to make it possible to tell what is really on one's mind." He observes, however, that, "some proponents have made it sound like a most esoteric experience. If dialogue is to be helpful to organisational processes, it must be seen as accessible to all of us. Unfortunately, abstract description does not help accessibility. As we all know, "the devil is in the

details" (Schein, 1993, p43). He continues:

> I became specifically preoccupied with the question of how dialogue was different from good face-to-face communication of the sort we learn about in group dynamics and human relations workshops. The difference does not become clear until one actually experiences the dialogue setting. Then, however, the difference is obvious and can be described unambiguously.
>
> Most communication and human relations workshops emphasise active listening, by which is meant that one should pay attention to all the communication channels – the spoken words, the body language, tone of voice, and emotional content. One should learn to focus initially on what the other person is saying, rather than on one's own intended response. In contrast, dialogue focuses on getting in touch with underlying assumptions (especially our own assumptions) that automatically determine when we choose to speak and what we choose to say. Dialogue is focussed more on the thinking process and how our perceptions and cogitations are performed by our past experiences. The assumption here is that if we become more conscious of how our *thought* process works, we will think better, collectively, and communicate better. An important goal of dialogue is to enable *the group* to reach a higher level of consciousness and creativity through the gradual creation of a shared set of meanings and a "common" thinking process.
>
> Active listening plays a role in this process, but is not the central focus or purpose. In fact, I discovered that I spent a lot more time in *self-analysis*, attempting to understand what *my own assumptions were*, and was relatively less focussed on actively listening to others. Feelings and all of the other dimensions of communication are important. Eventually, dialogue participants do "listen actively" to each other, but the path for getting there is quite different.
>
> In the typical sensitivity training workshop, we explore relationships through "opening up" and sharing, through giving and receiving feedback, and through examining of all the *emotional* problems of communication. In dialogue, however, we explore all the complexities of *thinking and language*. We discover how arbitrary our basic categories of thought and perception are, and, thereby, become conscious of imperfections or bias in our basic *cognitive* processes (Schein, 1993, p43).

Schein offers us a step by step account of how to start dialogue:

> In all of the groups that I have observed, initiated by William Isaacs, Peter Senge, or myself, the facilitator started by arranging the setting and then describing the concept. In each case, the group could understand the essence sufficiently to begin the conversation. The key to this understanding is to link dialogue to other experiences we have had that felt like real communication.
>
> The role of the facilitator can be characterised in terms of the following kinds of activities:
>
> Organise the physical space to be as nearly a circle as possible. Whether or not

> people are seated at a table or tables is not as important as the sense of equality that comes from sitting in a circle;
>
> Introduce the general concept, then ask everyone to think about an experience of dialogue in the sense of "good communication" in their past;
>
> Ask people to share with their neighbour what the experience was and to think about the characteristics of that experience (this works because people are relating very concrete experiences, not abstract concepts);
>
> Ask group members to share what it was in such past experiences that made for good communication and write these characteristics on a flip chart;
>
> Ask the group to reflect on these characteristics by having each person in turn talk about his/her reactions;
>
> Let the conversation flow naturally once everyone has commented (this requires one and a half to two hours or more);
>
> Intervene as necessary to clarify or elucidate, using concepts and data that illustrate the problems of communication (some of these concepts are spelled out below);
>
> Close the session by asking everyone to comment in whatever way they choose (Schein, 1993, pp44-45).

Finally, he offers us a map of the different ways of talking together, some helpful and some not (see Figure 4).

In the previous chapter (see "Finding some limits"), the writer has already expressed her concern at the literature's general "briskness" about the business of double-position reflection. Her first reaction to reading the articles of both Isaacs and Schein was, frankly, one of turmoil and envy. How come these guys make it sound so *easy*? Where is all the effort at attending, listening, incrementally adding meaning, working through the emotional accompaniments? How come they are all so *well-behaved*? To be fair to Isaacs, what he describes in some of the groups he has worked in does not sound like a Sunday School picnic but more like an all-in fight! But Schein's group sounds like a well-behaved group in a school room, this writer thought, followed closely by that note of envy, "I could be so lucky!"

It is probably going too far to say that this was a crisis of confidence, but it certainly

gave the writer pause for thought, given the development of her own understanding and practice.

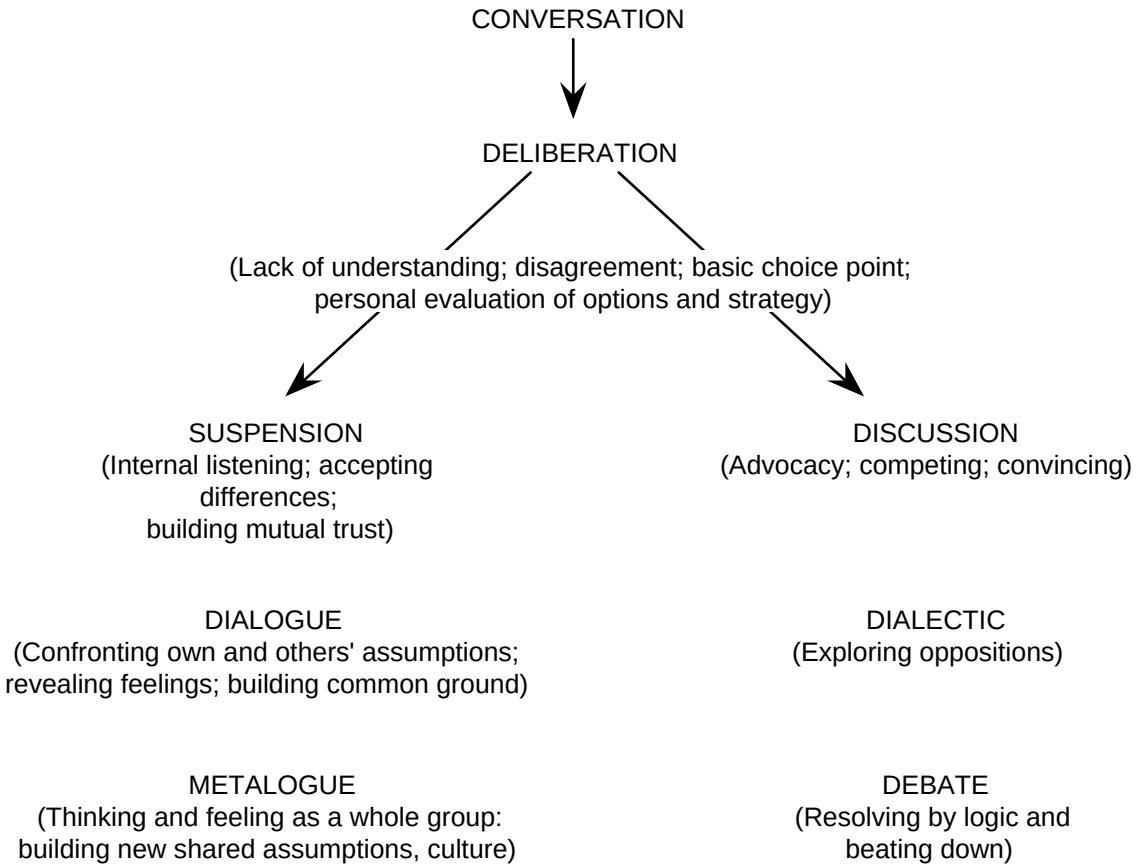


Figure 4: Ways of talking together (From Schein, 1993, p46)

In any event, the strength of her reaction certainly forced the writer to re-examine some of her own thinking and to frame some questions. Is there really such a difference between what I do and what Senge, Isaacs and Schein do? Are we talking about the same things? Am I operating more in the therapeutic mode than I had realised?

In answer to these questions, the writer has concluded that there is a difference between what they are doing and describing and what the writer is doing and describing. They are describing group processes in which the task of the group – to engage in reflection of a particular kind – has been deliberately framed as part of setting up the exercise in the first instance, and in which the ground rules or containers have been explicitly negotiated at the start. Moreover, those containers specifically regulate the way in

which emotional reaction will be dealt with – by exclusion or some way of "coding it". If we were to relate this process of containment to Gendlin's (1970) model, the dialogue which Schein describes is of a more abstract kind, essentially disconnected from experience of self – or from much immediate, felt experience of any kind.

Now the writer is conscious that she, too, does some of these things. She offers and models some techniques for facilitating self reflection which are described a little later. She does not, however, rule out the possibility of emotional reaction through the process. So is that what makes the difference? She believes that there is one other crucial difference, and that is that these writers have framed their activities as exercises in tracking and surfacing collective thinking, whereas she frames hers as an exercise in assisting an individual to track and surface their individual thinking, with the help of a facilitator or learning team.

This is not to say that the present writer never engages in the kind of activity described by Isaacs and Schein, but that their activity serves a different purpose – the clarification, development or creation of new visions, the solving of collective problems, the challenging of organisational "mind sets". The road to individual change and learning, she believes, is a different one, requiring different but at times related disciplines and approaches. In her view, there is a great deal of difference between asking an individual to examine their own scripts (including the filters through which they see the world) and asking them to track the surfacing and development of collective ones which – though important – are just that bit more visible because, once pointed out, one can observe other people "doing it", even if one has difficulty in observing it in oneself.

There *was* one other difference that is critical: it would probably make a *big* difference to walk into a room and be announced as Ed Schein, William Isaacs or Peter Senge...! Nita Cherry doesn't have quite the same ring to it. This is not just a throw-away line prompted by envy. It would be not oversimplifying the situation to suggest that

nowadays, when teams work with one of the "great names", they are predisposed to work in ways that can be much harder to initiate in other circumstances.

Moreover, she believes that asking individuals to do profound levels of self-reflection in a large group context is asking a great deal, and she restricts learning sets for this purpose to not more than four to six people. Some work – for some individuals – can only happen on a one-to-one basis.

Her view would be that in individual self-reflection, learning and change, there are no easy short-cuts when we are dealing with the personal scripts which we value as profoundly as we value our own skins, and when we are profoundly "stuck" in some part of the Gestalt cycle or in one of Argyris' defensive routines.

It is this writer's observation and experience that when people are invited to review and possibly change their personal scripts – including their preferred ways of viewing the world – it is not helpful to assume that emotions are not, and do not need to be implicated, to some level at least. She does not experience Schein's (1993) apparent comfort in separating out cognitive and emotional process and experience. Many of those who work with this writer will seek her out to work privately, away from a larger group, when they fear a loss of face in acknowledging fear, uncertainty, pain or grief. Many will take the risk of acknowledging and sharing their emotional reaction – whatever its level – with others in their learning team, at the time that they experience it. Very, very few, in her experience, could honestly say that the exploration of self is a purely cognitive experience, with no emotional content. Self is, after all, often our most closely guarded possession, though we may defend and guard it with an intensity and in ways of which we are not fully aware.

Nonetheless, the excursion into the thinking of Isaacs and Schein was stimulating and extending. It forced this writer to critique her thinking and practice, and to think more

deeply about the ways in which anxiety and uncertainty is contained and managed when people are engaging in self-reflection of any kind – whether that "self" is the group or the individual. Isaac's discussion of containers is particularly interesting in that respect.

This writer is also conscious of the importance of helping the group to develop the sort of containers (for anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity) which Isaacs describes, to make the task manageable. She believes that in her own practice, she has become effective at helping a group of individuals to quickly develop confidence in their collective and individual capacity to manage and constructively work with any kind of data that they generate, including strong emotional content.

Ultimately, it is by the management of such containers that any kind of process work becomes possible. In the writer's experience, processing the process work of a group is probably the hardest thing of all to do well and if setting some groundlines at the start helps, then it surely will be a lot easier than what Schein sounds as if he experienced in sensitivity training groups, where "anything goes".

Chapter 6: Summary and evaluation

In this final chapter, the writer attempts to summarise the outcomes of the thesis work and to evaluate the contribution which these make to collective knowledge and practice.

Before doing any of these things, it is perhaps helpful to summarise for the reader the central research issues which have been the subject of the thesis, and the major outcomes sought.

The central issues were:

- how and why does reflection help us to develop our understanding of ourselves in ways that help us to learn?

- what practical reflective techniques work?

- how do our tacit or implicit "theories" about ourselves guide our behaviour, and does it help to make our implicit theories (Argyris & Schon, 1978) explicit?

- how can the practitioner – the educator or facilitator of learning in others – use reflection to understand and develop his or her own practice, with its suite of acknowledged and unacknowledged "theories" or mental models (Senge, 1990), and to effectively integrate these themes with practice?

- and how does the researcher tap into, make use of, test and perhaps refine the stock of existing theory and knowledge?

The outcomes sought by consideration of these issues were:

- review and refinement of some of the theoretical constructs used by the writer and other theorists and practitioners of reflection-based learning;

- enhancement of the practical reflection-based techniques used by the writer to facilitate the development of managers;

- documentation of a case-study in which reflective techniques were themselves applied to the development of the writer's personal praxis as she attempts to integrate her conceptual understanding and practical application of reflection.

Consistent with these intended outcomes, this chapter is organised around the following headings:

How and why reflection assists behavioural change: summary and reflections on the writer's contribution to "sense making" or theoretical understanding;

Tools of the trade: summary and reflections on the writer's contribution to practice;

The reflective stance in praxis development: summary and reflections on how this case study throws light on the development of personal praxis;

Reflections on the research: an evaluation of the contribution made by documenting an individual self-reflective case study.

How and why reflection assists behavioural change: summary and reflections on the writer's contribution to "sense making" or theoretical understanding

One of the major intentions of this thesis has been to describe the development of a certain area of the writer's praxis – that concerned with using reflection to help define

and articulate areas of self which are implicated in the application of skills and learning in areas critical to the effective practice of the individual. The subject of such reflection could be one's own self or that of another person.

The point of theoretical understanding reached by the writer as to how and why reflection assist behavioural change was described in some detail in Chapter 5 (see especially 268 - 274, 279 - 285, and 294 - 296). In summary, she sees the practitioner as striving to create a situation in which the subject of reflection – self or other – can make sense of self in a way which will result in achievable and helpful behavioural change. She has described one way in which that situation can be created: by paying attention to the data which is being generated by the other person (if working with another), by one's own self and by the interaction between both people. These data are organised into Gestalten, in which salient features of the figure stand out from the ground and are surfaced or brought into the awareness of both parties in ways which both make sense, can be accepted and which trigger insight into how the self is characteristically operating – for better or worse. That insight can be of a quality which generates acknowledgment, acceptance, respect and caring for self and at the same time a profound sense of the possibilities for productive change which exists within the self. It is argued that at the moment of insight, the self is already changed – it has been re-invented or re-framed – to use Freeman's (1993) term – in a way that enriches both one's understanding of and experience of self.

This is a very brief summary of the output of a process of reading and thinking that went on over a period of years. But to what extent does it represent a useful contribution to the understanding of anyone but the writer herself? Here, then, let the writer set forth her modest claims to being "a useful contributor".

Her first claim would be simply that her description of what is entailed in self reflection - and its facilitation - articulates something which is not easily or commonly captured in

the literature. Although the contemporary management literature makes many direct and indirect references to reflection and its place in learning, this writer contends that there are relatively few attempts to explore what reflection actually requires of those who apply it to themselves and those who facilitate its application.

This writer believes she has made a particular contribution by accessing and integrating strands of thought from different branches of literature and practice, and by testing that thinking in her own practice. In particular, she turned to contemporary literature on research methodology to explore the reflective stance of critical subjectivity or knowingness, and found that it had been thought about, in that context, in ways that are not acknowledged or integrated with the management development literature. As Chapter 2 of this thesis suggests researchers for some time have been wrestling with the practical, as well as the epistemological, implications of the need to "stand aside" from oneself in order to "see" oneself.

Similarly, she found that she had to go back to the counselling literature of twenty or more years ago to find serious attempts to describe and explain what is going when human beings reflect upon themselves. And unless contemporary development practitioners have had the benefit of being trained in counselling (or have accessed that literature for some other reason) this writer believes there is not much in the current literature on the learning organisation to encourage them to look that far back, or in that particular place. In fact, Schein's (1993) comments - which were so vigorously explored in Chapter 5 - would positively dissuade them from doing any such thing.

Arguably, even Schon's (1987) work on the reflective practitioner is relatively silent on the nature of the reflective act itself though he certainly acknowledges the challenge of articulating knowledge-in-action.

So, then, a claim can be made for having explored and captured in words a very

complex set of ideas and actions that are undoubtedly part of the repertoire of a great many practitioners, but which few have put on paper in this way.

A second claim would be that in her treatment of reflection, this writer has challenged a view of the world that suggests that reflection is essentially a cognitive act, one that is divorced from emotional dialogue (with self or others) and happens in a cool container of suspended judgement and logic. This writer conceives of critical subjectivity as being a state of knowingness about self which does not limit or rule out any of the data, whether generated by brain or heart, but which does require a capacity to alternate closeness and distance from self, including full engagement with and detachment from, the emotional self. The person who would facilitate that kind of reflection is not one, in this writer's view, who can rely on the application of logic, or force of their own personality or reputation. Rather, as described in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis, it is an act of much greater complexity, requiring a commitment to, awareness of and acceptance of both self and the other person which incorporates all facets of human experiencing - intellectual, emotional, physical and intuitive. Hopefully, this wholistic understanding of reflection has been successfully captured throughout the thesis.

A third claim would be that this thesis takes the notion of reflection and views it through a number of different lenses - the lens of reflection in research, of reflection in learning and, to a lesser extent, of reflection in the development of one's self-hood. So far as the writer is aware, a comprehensive treatment of the subject in this way, in one place, has not been undertaken previously.

Like a great deal of reflection on self, the writer has difficulty making an objective evaluation of her efforts as a "theorist" or "sense-maker". These pages bear testimony to the fact that sense-making – with the help and advice of others in the literature and in person – has been a very important ingredient in crystallising her efforts in practice. As acknowledged earlier, the writer has a great need for sense-making and this has been a

powerful driver for her to operationalise or articulate her own or others' tacit "knowing-in-action",

There have been times, as in Chapter 2, when the writer set herself the task of engaging systematically with a body of literature which contained elements which were unfamiliar, unappealing and complex, as well as elements which were exciting, familiar and attractive. In that chapter, the literature can be said to have been "reviewed" in the more traditional sense of that word – that is, an attempt has been made to weigh up the literature, to see what it has to offer, and to put one view in the context of another, contrasting view.

In the third chapter, accessing of the literature was more pragmatically driven by the interests of the writer and those with whom she came into contact. The literature was used in a very deliberate way to inform, guide, enhance and make sense of experience. This use of literature in the development of understanding and theory is much closer to what one would associate with the development of praxis: messy, unsystematic and needs driven.

In the context of researching herself and offering this account as a case-study in self-reflection on personal development, this writer has had a need, however, to try to surface the way her thinking and theory developed, and how the literature and experience shaped that process. She is conscious that this attempt at mapping the development of her thinking has been incomplete. Of necessity, she has selected from among the data banks generated by over six years of praxis development.

This is true not only of the data of practical experience, but also the data contained in the literature. For example, the writer has made only a fleeting reference to the work of Carl Jung (for example, Jung, 1933) but has had, and continues to have, her understanding of selfhood and the process of reflection on self immeasurably enriched

by the thinking of one of the great minds of our century.

Another body of literature which attracted this writer, though in no sense can she claim to have reviewed it systematically, is that concerned with the development of our understanding of the concept of "selfhood". How our awareness and concept of our own "selfhood" is created; how our image of ourselves changes over time; how we engage in self-dialogue and "self-talk" without necessarily being fully aware of the messages being given and received; and how we develop, or avoid, deeper insight into our selves (of the kind that would be associated with "third position" reflection). Freeman (1993), for example, offers a highly sophisticated and stimulating exploration of the processes by which we continually re-invent and re-write ourselves.

This sort of literature has certainly extended and enriched the present writer's thinking about selfhood and how to explore self in ways that are helpful in opening up possibilities for constructive learning and change. Further, more systematic exploration of such literature – and the practice it generates – is the most likely future direction for her own continuing praxis development.

Perhaps one other way of evaluating one's effort is to ask: would you do anything differently next time? When it comes to developing her understanding and theory, this writer can only say: "no, this is the way it has to happen for me, at least at this stage in my life." It wasn't always easy, but it was always interesting, always stimulating and at times, the act of sense-making in cognitive terms can only be described a "peak experience" which was exhilarating and highly motivating (as in, "I can't wait to translate this into action").

Tools of the trade: summary and reflections of the writer's contribution to practice

In this section, the writer reviews some of the specific techniques she uses to assist the

process of reflection when working with others – whether one-to-one or in small groups (usually not more than twenty in size). These techniques need to be put in the context of the writer's general approach which was summarised in the previous section of this chapter.

a) The general tools of helping

In order to enter into the kind of dialogue which facilitates deep levels of self-reflection, the present writer uses tools of "helping" or facilitating inspired by the work of Rogers (1981), Carkhuff (1969) and Egan (1974). The rationale for using these tools has been offered in the previous section: namely, that reflection on self is, by definition, an intensely personal and intimate act - one that needs to be approached with tools best fitted to that purpose. This writer believes she has made a significant contribution simply by revisiting, rearticulating and systematically sharing with others a body of professional practice and literature that seems strangely neglected in major, contemporary treatments of reflection as a tool for personal development and behavioural change. Her use of the counselling literature has been an attempt to describe and make explicit skills in helping which are too often tacit and the subject of "knowing-in-action". Her intention has been to ensure that these skills can be operationalised, discussed, taught and learned like anything else, without the elements of mystery and magic often associated with the gurus of the profession.

For example, Carkhuff's (1969) description of the individual undergoing self-exploration is remarkably similar to the processes of action research and action learning which have been described in many places during this thesis. Like Rogers he identifies stages in the process:

- at first, a minimal translation of the helpee's exploration into self-understanding;
- the development of some direction, however tentative, based upon the minimal understanding;

- acting upon this directionality;
- incorporating the feedback from the action;
- reflecting back upon prior understanding and sharpening earlier discriminations;
- acting more constructively based upon finer and more sensitive understanding (Carkhuff, 1969, p47).

The present writer has developed her own statement of the helping skills which is offered to those with whom she works in order to explain and share the skills involved.

In summary, she sees those skills as including:

- the suspension of judgement, advice-giving and blaming;
- the communication of respect and positive regard, which is very rarely totally unconditional, but includes the communication of the following messages, in order:
  - with me you are free to be who you are;
  - you are worthy of my effort to understand;
  - I genuinely believe that you can do better in your understanding of yourself, but this needs to happen at a manageable and helpful pace, which you, ultimately, control;
- *attending* behaviour of the kind described in the previous chapter, which consists of tuning into data arising from the self, the other and the interaction between self and other;

- *active listening* involving *acknowledgment* of the other's messages (both verbal and non-verbal), *reflection* back of those messages in some way to let the other know that they have been heard, and *summarising* or *crystallising* the essence of what is being communicated by the other in an attempt to clarify meaning;

- *acknowledgment of* and *sense-making of one's own internal data* and how this is affecting one's behaviour;

- *genuineness, authenticity* and *congruence* (absence of significant gaps or discrepancies between how the facilitator experiences the other person and the way in which they are engaging with them; for example, not deliberately expressing enormous pleasure at working with someone who is actually experienced as challenging and difficult);

- *appropriate self-disclosure* (this is not the same as dumping your "left-hand" column on someone, but is a preparedness to acknowledge and share things about one's own experience that might be helpful to the other person; it is a reaction to the concept of the faceless therapist who offers little or nothing of themselves);

- increasing *focus* in the process of adding value to the other person's attempts to interpret or make sense of their experience; this happens in three ways:

    - through being increasingly *concrete* and specific about the *content* of what is being communicated and explored (making what is tacit about the substance more explicit);

    - by the *incremental addition of meaning* to what has been acknowledged

or recognised by the other person (adding another layer of meaning, but not in a way that the other person cannot understand or rejects out of hand);

- by being *immediate* about the *process* which is going on between the facilitator and the other person, if that process is being blocked by either party or seems in some way to be a microcosm of the whole problem or issue or script being explored by the other person; immediacy is meta-communication: communication about the communication;

- *constructive confrontation* which is achieved by helpfully:

  - offering additional data or perspectives on the issue at hand;

  - reframing the issue (for example, through metaphor);

  - feeding back observed discrepancies between the other person's insights and their actions or behaviour; their actual self and the expressed ideal of self, the other person's experience of themselves and the facilitator's experience of them.

These skills have been listed in ascending order, not of difficulty (the first ones are actually the hardest for many people, including the present writer), but of application. This is not a list which is intended to explore the concepts in detail, but to give an indication of what, in the writer's view, is potentially required of those who seek to work helpfully in the development of self-insight through enhancing self-reflection.

b) <u>Containers</u>

Like Isaacs (1993) and Schein (1993) this writer has had to find ways to helpfully operationalise and make accessible for deep reflection a territory that many adults find potentially threatening – in other words, to find "containers" for the anxiety and ambiguity with which the process is often associated. She mentioned in the previous chapter that one way of making this kind of reflection more accessible is to represent it as a piece of work, a task, a job at hand, another aspect of continuous practice improvement. Figure 5 provides a way of mapping the potential of the work that might be done.

This diagram was developed in collaboration with a colleague and came to be called "the diagnostic pyramid". It is perhaps helpful to say a little more about its development. Like the concept of "personal scripts" (see Chapter 3) its development was very pragmatic and – again, like the personal scripts – it was triggered by work being done in relation to systems thinking, specifically the work of Senge (1990). Senge uses a pyramid to represent the connection between surface events and perceived problems (at the top of the pyramid) and the generative structures (archetypes) which trigger them (represented at the bottom of the pyramid).

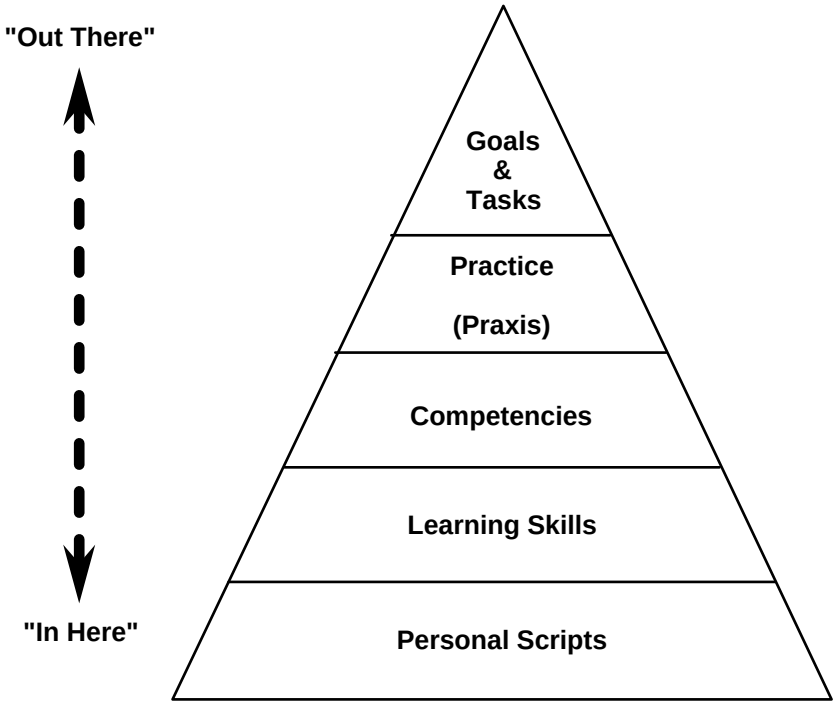
The pyramid offers a simple, graphic way to make the connection between the tasks and issues with which an individual needs to engage "out there" in the world and the self which the person brings to that work.

The data at all levels of the pyramid are portrayed as legitimate and helpful avenues to reflection.

Although developed in a pragmatic way, it should be noted that there is a nice similarity between the levels of progressive reflection set out in the pyramid and the progression of reflection from "object to subject" described in Rogers (1961) and set out earlier in this chapter.

In offering this to others, this practitioner suggests that the greatest leverage – in terms of the greatest return for effort – comes as one goes to the bottom of the pyramid, where insight can yield great potential gains in terms of choices, options and possibilities for learning, change and action.

Levels Of Diagnosis And Learning



Goals and Tasks:	Your insight into what needs to be done. The things you need to do to achieve desired changes or outcomes.
Practice:	The methods or strategies you use to accomplish your tasks (your "praxis")
Competencies:	The personal qualities and abilities you need for successful implementation of your practice
Learning Skills:	The way you learn new competencies and develop existing ones
Personal Scripts:	The characteristic ways you do things which both help and hinder your success at all of the above

Figure 5: Mapping the possibilities of continuous practice improvement

(Developed in collaboration with James Ford)

The other(s) to whom this is offered have freedom to choose where on the pyramid they

will work, and many choose to start by clarifying the work which faces them in the outside world (represented at the top of the pyramid). Indeed, this is important work in its own right, since not all knowledge and insight come from reflecting upon self. We need to attend closely to the data the world presents us with, make our own sense of it and compare that with the sense which others make. Sometimes – often, even – careful assessment of the wood suggests the direction of the wood-carver's action, without any obvious, conscious engagement with the wood-cutter's own vision. In any event, often managers have been equipped with many tools and devices for developing their understanding of the tasks and environments which they face, and diligent application of those tools and devices produces results.

Sometimes, the task is so challenging in its complexity and unfamiliarity that the manager or other practitioner must think quite self-consciously about the choice of tools, and their repertoire or tool kit. Sometimes they find gaps in the kit and make decisions to develop their "strategic thinking" kit or their "knowledge of the balance sheet". In any event at this, the next level of the pyramid, the challenge is to look at what one has available and to ask questions, in praxis development, about "why you do what you do; why use this tool rather than this?; is there anything else that might be fitter for the purpose?"

Some managers find that questions about their praxis raise further questions about their competencies (the personal qualities and abilities needed for successful implementation of their praxis), and about their ability to learn new competencies or enhance existing ones. And some find their way to the bottom of the pyramid, by accident or design, engaging in exploration of the personal scripts which provide the foundation (in terms of both energy and frameworks) on which all the rest is built.

This map, crude though it is, if offered as a way of both objectifying, legitimising and making accessible the layers of work which might be tackled. Its strength, in practice,

is its simplicity: it offers a fairly straightforward way of orienting oneself, finding one's way around the territory of the self. It is offered here because it has become such a commonly used part of the writer's own "tool kit" that it orients her own thinking about self, and has therefore possibly "leaked", without being acknowledged or declared, into the pages of this thesis.

When working with individuals in the context of a large group (i.e. more than sixteen individuals), this writer normally makes it clear to the group that it is helpful to model the process of working through the diagnostic pyramid. There are two reasons for this: to illustrate the kinds of issues that might be accessed at each level of the pyramid, and to demonstrate the facilitation skills involved, so that the participants, working in smaller learning sets, can work through the process themselves. The process is modelled in a way that carefully respects the privacy of the individuals concerned (lots of checking along the way that it is okay to proceed) and involves frequent "stopping the tape" and discussion with other members of the group ("What do you think the issue here might be?"). In this way, the task is "objectified" for demonstration purposes and made less mysterious and threatening.

It is worth mentioning at this point that "diagnosis" of a personal script that is worth taking developmental action on can take anything from an hour (unusual) to a week (in real time). Usually, that week is spread over some months, although the opportunity to participate in an intensive residential program can accelerate that time.

It is the management of the "containers" that leads this writer to differentiate her work in management and development from that of the therapist. Although she does engage in private counselling and therapeutic work, the work undertaken in management programs, working with the pyramid (which, by the way, is never offered in the context of private counselling sessions where the person has specified in advance that they are "coming for counselling"), is observably different. There the containers are more in

evidence, more overtly discussed and directly acknowledged, and deliberately used to manage and limit the potential for anxiety. As the work continues, and the level of trust and skill in managing the process is better developed among participants, people may engage in what amounts to therapeutic work with another, and with the facilitator. By then, the containers are not needed to the same extent. But by the same token, they are never far away if needed: "maybe this is something you'd like to pursue privately with Nita", "don't let us stray over the line on this one", "tell us when you want us to back off", are all ways in which members of the group signal to one another that "safety" is not far away.

There are many other tools and techniques this practitioner uses to facilitate reflection, including Senge's (1990) "ladder of inference" for surfacing and testing assumptions and other aspects of mental models, and Argyris' (1991) "left and right hand column" exercise for surfacing defensive routines. The "diagnostic pyramid", however, and the notion of "personal scripts" which was described in Chapters 3 and 4 and alluded to at intervals since, are two that have some element of originality – although, as someone once sagely observed – there is nothing new under the sun.

c) Structured interactive dialogue

In order to develop the skills of attending, active listening, immediacy and constructive confrontation described earlier, the writer – at times with the assistance of others and at times working and thinking alone – has also developed her use of what she has called structured interactive dialogue in the way illustrated towards the end of the previous chapter. She believes that this interactive experiential reflection is very helpful if insight into the self is to gain the kind of critical self-knowing associated with sustained "third position" reflection.

She had found, however, that willingness to participate in this process – and effective

use of it – is heightened if individuals are offered some frameworks which are intended to make sense of the process, and some techniques which support it. The need for sense-making has been a major stimulus to this writer to "operationalise" or articulate the tacit knowledge behind the technique: she has not been content just to say "watch me" or "have a go" and acquire knowledge in action. While these are important and useful aspects of the learning process, she believes – for all the reasons set out in the previous sections of this chapter, that translating tacit skill or knowledge into explicit words injects new power into the learning process.

For example, it helps if individuals are overtly and deliberately offered the "diagnostic pyramid" described in the previous section of this chapter, and the description of "personal scripts" contained in Chapters 3 and 4.

Before engaging in interactive role-play, the writer would offer – or for preference, encourage the group to develop – some descriptions of key skills involved in the process, such as attending and active listening. As the role-play continues, the writer will sometimes "stop the tape" (i.e. the action) and ask participants to quite specifically reflect on how they are feeling, what they are thinking and how they are experiencing the other person and their interaction with each other. Private reflection of this kind is often followed by immediate sharing and processing of the data generated by the reflection. This means that the writer is sometimes taking the risk of deliberately triggering third position reflection in the midst of the action. If she herself is part of the action, then she must do what she asks the others to do. If "doubling" is involved, then those doubling participate in the same reflective process.

This is a very intensive technique and usually generates self-insight not only for the person who is its subject, but for all those engaged in the process. It is not a technique, however, which the writer would use unless there was a reasonably high degree of trust in the group and/or a commitment to take the risk of working together in this way. It

also requires that the facilitator who initiates the action is prepared to engage in and model the process herself, thereby building the confidence of others in the integrity of the process, as well as demonstrating some of the skills involved.

d) Story-telling

Sometimes the writer does not use structured interactive dialogue at all, but uses something a bit more "low key" in which individuals are invited to reflect on "critical" incidents by writing about them or telling the story of the event. The event could be one which occurred sometime in the past, in another place, or it could have occurred very recently (for example, in the context of some experiential activity or task that was part of the immediate learning context, such as a workshop). Sometimes, of course, story telling and story writing occur quite spontaneously in the course of interaction and journal keeping or diary work, and the stories are formed without prompting from anyone else. Sometimes, the writer will offer some quite specific triggers to structure the telling of the story: what happened? what did you say, feel or think? what were others doing or saying? what do you think was the impact of your behaviour on them? of theirs on you? what outcomes were generated? were you satisfied with them? is there anything you would do differently next time?

When the stories are told or read (sometimes people are invited to share copies of diary extracts with others), others in the group are invited to reflect back to the person anything that strikes them about the story itself or the way it was told (the language, non-verbal cues if it was spoken, pauses, and so on). The invitation is couched as, "what did you hear/read in the story or its telling?" Sometimes the story teller is invited to tell the story again – and each time, the story is told with the addition of detail and meaning which were not contained in the first telling.

Working in this way, the story teller and those hearing or reacting to the story start to

notice the mental models, assumptions and other aspects of the personal scripts that are suggested by the story. The facilitator (the writer or a colleague) will sometimes lead the conversation at the outset, to model the kinds of listening and reflection which might be helpful, and then take a much less interventionist role as the story telling continues. Often as the skill and confidence of the participants in working with the process grow, there is little intervention from the facilitator. To quote Peter Senge during a session he ran at a seminar held in Melbourne in August 1994 (attended by this writer), "we talk and we talk until the talking starts."

There are other specific techniques which this writer occasionally uses to "accelerate" the surfacing of mental models – such as Argyris' (1991) "left and right hand column" technique, described in the previous chapter. She has found, however, that these work best when helping people to reflect on past situations and interactions, rather than ones immediately in train. To resort to asking people to "do a left and right hand column" as a way of getting them to be immediate with each other would be, to her, a sign that she and the group had not successfully created the kind of dialogue in which such disclosure would happen naturally. To suddenly accelerate that process, without first creating the state of readiness described in the previous section, would seem to her to be counter-productive.

When written down like this, it seems such a short list of "reflective techniques". In practice, it is this writer's observation – based on repeated practice of the same basic techniques – that it is these such "simple" things that are so hard to do, and yet so powerful when done well.

<u>The reflective stance in praxis development: summary and reflections on how this case study throws light on the development of personal praxis</u>

Towards the end of Chapter 2, this writer tried to describe the methods used in an effort

to inject some discipline into the process of development of her ideas and her practice. These are the disciplines of reflection associated with articulation (through speaking, drawing or writing; the adoption of the "third position" or the "meta-me" stance; the use of dialogue with others; and the writing and re-writing of the narrative).

When these disciplines are practised regularly, they produce - and hopefully accelerate - the integration of thought and action into praxis. As Chapter 2 also suggested the challenge is to develop a capacity for reflection in the midst of action, an openness to the possibility of learning in any situation and a preparedness to constantly enquire of oneself: what am I doing that seems to be working? what isn't working so well? and what do I need to do differently?

As this writer worked on the development of her praxis, there were two other things which emerged as being particularly important in enhancing that development. One was the need to be able to dialogue with others in a range of ways. Chapter 4 describes her encounters with several people through whom her praxis was significantly developed. These were individuals who were able to stimulate either critical analysis of ideas (as "Alan" was able to do with his Gestalt framework) and/or examination and extension of practice (as "Rebecca" was able to do with her modelling of listening skills). While the stories contained in Chapter 4 attempt to describe the ways in which ideas and practice developed, possibly what they don't reveal explicitly is the kind of openness to experience required of the practitioner-as-learner.

The reality was that the development of praxis documented in this thesis required this writer sometimes to put herself in the hands of others, to ask them to coach her, to "tell" or "teach" her. At all times it required her to cultivate an openness to experience in company with others and to the possibility of learning with and through others. As time went by, she tried to apply to her own learning the qualities of awareness described in Chapter 5 (pp268-272). In other words, the reflective stance was not something she

simply offered or shared with others to enhance their development, but something she needed to be able to do for and with herself, either alone or in company with others.

If the writer were to offer advice to others who are interested in the development of their personal praxis, it would be that "critical subjectivity" or critical "knowingness" about oneself is a continuing process, not an end state or achievement, and that at its best, it requires a capacity - or at least a willingness to try - to be "tuned in" to the data presented by all the internal and external channels of sensation, imagination, feeling and thought. For most people, she contends this represents a major challenge - partly because we are not usually taught how to do this and partly because our preferences and other personal scripts are likely to make it difficult for us to tune into some - or even all - of these channels. Without the help of others, and without tapping into the wisdom contained in the literature, this writer would never have developed the understanding, skill or confidence to apply reflective practice to herself.

The writer believes, therefore, that praxis development in a field like management development which requires the engagement of self in dialogue with others, is not and cannot be an entirely solitary occupation. There comes a time when the data of the interpretation of data offered by another challenges, transcends and transforms the data and understanding of data that the individual is able to generate for him or herself.

The writer noted earlier that there were two things which were particularly important in enhancing her praxis development. In addition to the involvement of others, the writer found that the production of the narrative account - the text of the thesis itself - was a significant catalyst for her learning. Chapter 2 (pp92-105) describes the challenge of writing things in action research, and of the power of oral and written narrative in the creation of meaning, the understanding of self and the transformation of self. Again, without repeating all that has been said before, the writer would like to make the point briefly: that the placing of the symbolism of words and metaphors on experience does

not simply articulate that experience, but changes it, potentially enriching it or limiting and diminishing it.

In the sustained narrative of the thesis, what was being transformed were the writer's mental models - and not simply her mental models about "how to do reflection" but her mental models about herself and what blocks her from reaching and maintaining the reflective stance in relation to herself, as well as in relation to others. In truth, she "met herself" both in action and on the written page. And in encountering herself, in understanding herself as she is, she has already - in the paradoxical terms of the Gestalt model of change - begun to change and enrich that self.

If this were to translate into advice for others, the advice would be: take the trouble to articulate your understanding and your practice, take the trouble to write down, or draw or tape record what you know of yourself, and read or listen to what you have written or said. While one doesn't have to write a thesis to gain value from this process, it is the writer's observation that some form of sustained narrative is more effective than the sporadic documentation of isolated, or individual events and insights. For example, it can be helpful to re-read a series of journal entries made over a few weeks and to attempt to summarise the thoughts and feelings which are triggered by the process of re-reading.

In the writer's experience there are other tools that are helpful in enhancing praxis development, although in re-reading the narrative of this thesis, the writer is conscious that this has been a very imperfect attempt to describe the way in which theory and practice came together to inform and enrich one another. The process of integration was much messier that this account suggests, moving forward and backward and forward again in jerky steps rather than in a continuous and well-orchestrated process of continual testing and refinement. There were months – years even, in the case of her use of the counselling literature – when the writer literally "forgot" the theory and kept

re-inventing understanding based solely on the basis of practice, and other people's words.

The importance of the concept of praxis was never far from her mind, however, once she began leading the Master of Business in Management program for RMIT. She wanted to "operationalise" this concept so that managers would have some methods for surfacing and refining their own practice as managers. Focussing, in these groups, on the realms of management and consulting, she would offer some "questions about your praxis" and invite the managers and consultants to not simply answer them but invent their own questions. Examples of such questions would be:

- when you take on the role of "leader" or "consultant", what do you think you intend to do in working with your team or client?

- how do you or would you represent it to them?

- how do you or will you define your responsibility to them?

- how interested and committed are you to the work you undertake as "leader" or "consultant"?

- how is the experience changing you?

- how do or will you manage anxiety, ambiguity, uncertainty, conflict or debate in the course of your work with that team or client?

- what counts as relevant data for you in making sense of situations or solving problems?

- how much data do you need?

- why do you do any of the things you do? do you know why?

- does anyone else do it the way you do?

- how do you know?

- is their reason for doing it the same as yours?

- how do you evaluate what you do?

Most – if not all – of these questions (or some variation of them) would be relevant to many other occupations (for "leader" substitute "accountant", "plumber", "hairdresser").

The writer is conscious that in respect of her use of the techniques of reflection in research, practice and learning, she has answered a good many of these questions in this thesis. But she has not answered all of them. For example, she has not said anything about the kind of responsibility she feels towards her clients and colleagues while working with them in the ways described. Many of the values and assumptions implicit in these methods are not difficult to articulate: respect for others' wisdom and integrity, unless seriously damaged by the lack of it; commitment to working with people not "on" them; and a belief in the capacity of most human beings to work through situations which are problematic and challenging for them, given space and encouragement. To reflect only on these things, however, would be to evade some harder questions: does your need to be seen to be competent ever lead you to define your responsibility to your clients in ways that limit your individual and collective freedom to think and act? if your client has got a serious and urgent problem which others readily experience but he/she won't acknowledge, how long do you let the process of interactive dialogue take

its natural course? precisely when and how would you accelerate it? how does the very concept of feeling "responsibility" toward someone or something start to shape the kind of reflective processes you will engage in together?

The writer does have some tentative answers to these questions, even though they have not been stated in this thesis. The point to be made here, is that such questions demonstrate the power of self-reflective praxis development. In theory, it would be possible to develop praxis by reflecting on one's personal theory and one's practice "at arm's length" as it were, as though they were things separate from oneself, as in: "I will do x rather than y because the books say to do it that way." Self-reflective praxis development requires one to go further by coming close to oneself: "Why am *I* so attracted to x rather than y?" "Why have I chosen to read that book and not another?" In this process, the self is acknowledged by the self as fully involved in – and responsible for – the process of selecting and integrating theory and practice.

Imperfect though it may have been, this case-study in the development of one aspect of praxis, the writer believes, has at the very least demonstrated the potential of the technique of systematic self-reflection in enhancing praxis development.

In this instance, the self-reflective development of praxis was achieved in a particular way – by engaging in self-reflective dialogue and practice with others, and through the use of narrative (the act of writing the thesis) as a reflective device. The reader needs to bear in mind that this particular study has also been a research exercise: a case of reflecting on the use of self-reflection to develop praxis! From that perspective, self-reflective dialogue and narrative were also research tools used to generate data. Their use as a means of praxis development and as research tools are closely related, however, and so are addressed together in the next – and last – section of this chapter.

<u>Reflections on the research: an evaluation of the contribution made by documenting an</u>

individual self-reflective case study

This is perhaps the hardest part of the chapter to write. Following the advice of Zuber-Skerritt (1992) this reflection needs to take the form of evaluation, focussed on four critical questions: Was the research method fit for the purpose? In her dialogue with others and in the production of narrative, did the researcher maintain the necessary "critical attitude" (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992), "critical knowing or critical subjectivity" (Reason, 1988)? How has the research methodology affected or changed the researcher? Is the data useful to anyone else?

In answering all of these questions, the writer is necessarily striving to achieve and maintain that "critical attitude" but is conscious of the fact that the written account bears its own testimony and response to the questions. The reader will undoubtedly form his or her own view of all of them.

Was the research method fit for the purpose? The conceptual justification for the method is contained in Chapter 3, and won't be repeated, or even summarised here. The evaluation undertaken here is based on the experience of having done it, and having reflected on the doing of it. To research the development of one's own theory and practice, and the combination of those two things into praxis, has produced a level of concentration and analysis during that process which has profoundly changed it. The development would not have proceeded in the way it has if it was not the subject of research. It is not simply that the researcher has been more deliberately self-conscious and self-reflective – she believes that the capacity for "meta-me" reflection is so much a part of her learning practice that reflection of that kind would have become a "way of life" in any event. The effort of being "researcher" and not just a "learner" has produced a different kind of difference, summed up in these words: "the research literature". This writer would never, operating simply as a "learner", set herself the task of discovering what the research literature had to say about reflection in the context of

research. Without that discovery, the writer's understanding of the concept would not have been honed to the point it has, since, in her view, the research literature has far more to say about what is involved in reflection – and particularly reflection upon the self – than does the literature relating to individual and organisational learning.

A critical part of the research process has been the use of narrative – in many forms – to help the researcher develop a capacity for "critical subjectivity". To see one's own words on the page is to meet oneself, with one's mental models revealed. At the same time, the development of the narrative (and particularly the writing of the thesis itself), has been used to crystallise and enhance the researcher's own sense-making, as she developed her "theory" about why and how reflection works. Working from diaries and case files, the researcher has tried, in Chapter 4, to give an accurate account of how her thinking and practice developed. Inevitably, however, she is thinking backwards, seeing things in retrospect and unable to capture fully the person who started out on the journey.

Which leads into the question of how the research methodology has affected or changed the researcher. In an unusual and insightful book *Rewriting the Self*, Mark Freeman (1993) explores the relationship between history, memory and narrative in the development of our self-understanding – literally, the sense we make of ourselves.

> For what I have come to believe is that there is no more appropriate or exciting arena for understanding what hermeneutic inquiry is – as concerns both its possibilities and its problems – than the exploration of that most unusual and elusive being we call the "self" ... Why is this so? When we try to interpret something outside of ourselves, be it a text or a painting or a person, there is something *there* before us; words or splashes of paint or actions. But what really is *there* when the object of our interpretive endeavours is ourselves? Our pasts, you might answer, the history of our words and deeds. But are these pasts, these histories, suitably compared to that which exists outside ourselves? They are *our* pasts, *our* histories, and are in that sense inseparable from who is doing the interpreting, namely ourselves: subject and object are one. We are thus interpreting precisely that which, in some sense, we ourselves have fashioned through our own reflective imagination (Freeman, 1993, p5).

Freeman's book includes a detailed examination of the relationship between "living" and "telling" – that is, between life as we experience it moment to moment, and the stories we subsequently tell about it. One can debate whether there is something significantly fictional about the tales we ultimately tell. For some (for example, White, 1978) stories about life are a large step away from life itself and should not be confused with it; for others (for example, MacIntyre, 1981) the disjunction is not so great, since even the stories we tell, and the act of telling them, is a part of living itself.

The basic question, as seen by Freeman, is: do narratives by virtue of being told or written at a significant remove from the flux of immediate experience, inevitably falsify life itself? He argues that, even if we do not live narratives of the same nature and scope as those we tell when we reflect on the past, the very act of making sense of ourselves and others is only possible in and through the fabric of narrative itself. Through narrative (whether spoken or written), he suggests, we have the means to engage in the kind of liberation of thinking important to those who originally developed the concept of action research (see Chapter 2). Through narrative, he suggests, we are able to step beyond the socially constructed nature of ourselves, and:

> undergo the transformation from a kind of object, prey to the constructive forces of society and culture, to a wilful subject, able both to put into question those narratives assumed to be given and to transform in turn the sociocultural surround itself... Why might this be important? As Bakhtin (1986, p139) has written, "The better a person understands the degree to which he is externally determined, the closer he comes to understanding and exercising his real freedom..." When does this sort of thing happen? Among other occasions, it happens, Bakhtin goes on to note, whenever there is any "serious and probing" attempt at self-understanding – whenever, that is, one seeks to rewrite the self (Freeman, 1993, pp23-24).

In surfacing some of her own personal scripts – through dialogue with others and through narrative – this writer believes that she has re-written or re-invented a part of herself. To engage in the kind of attending behaviour described previously – in which one is open to and reflecting upon the data which comes from inside oneself, as well as the data generated by other people and their interaction with oneself – requires a

capacity to liberate oneself from oneself at critical moments. This has meant, for me, among other things, an ability to step aside from the script which calls for immediate, demonstrable competence in the eyes of self and others – and all its subtle manifestations. While I might not be able to eliminate the raw material of the script itself, I can observe it in operation and put it on hold for long enough to treat it like anything else: another piece of data, not an inevitable driver of behaviour.

As to the value of the research activity to others, its value lies in its products: the development of understanding – which has been shared in these pages; and the development of practice – which can only be shared with others in the instant of dialogue. In a practical sense I believe I have made a difference to people if I can help them to usefully re-connect with past experience which has somehow become fragmented and disassociated from their current picture or sense of themselves, and to which they now attach meanings that in some ways limit or even undermine their current capacity to create options and make responsible choices relating to their present behaviour. An example of this would be a person who believes that although they had a hard time of it with their previous boss, the current boss is much easier to relate to and, "it's a whole new scene, nothing like the past." Close attention to what the person actually says and does, however, suggests that they see the previous boss as being unusual and unreasonable, whose arbitrary-seeming behaviour had nothing to do with their own behaviour and personal scripts – scripts which are tolerated by or which match those of the current supervisor, but which are likely again to be dysfunctional when the next boss comes along. The crucial task here is not to uncover or piece together or excavate the past, to understand it per se, or to become a victim of it, but to use the way one thinks and feels about past experience as a source of help in understanding (and possibly changing) the way one learns or relates to others in the present.

What is interesting and important, in this work, is not whether what we remember of the

past is true, but the nature of our current retrospective understanding of it. In this sense, the lessons we learn from the past are ones we teach to ourselves in the present, not lessons which are inevitably inflicted on us by that past. When we are engaged in telling stories about past experience, we are engaged in a process of reconstructing the past, in which we literally re-invent it. How the story is told, the language used and the non-verbal behaviour displayed might be as revealing as the substance of the story. Both kinds of data tell us what the person is doing in the here-and-now, in terms of personal scripts and can be as revealing of the present as of the past.

As we structure the past, using the mental models of the present (and seeing it, sometimes, against the horizon of an imagined future), we meet what we believe we are, not what we were. As our current understanding of self becomes richer in perspective and deeper in insight, so we might enrich the past, dialoguing with our reconstruction of it in ways that heighten both our respect for it, and our compassion for it, and thus for ourselves. In thinking about former protagonists, about our parents, about situations which seem fraught with difficulty and distress at the time, and which we dread to meet again, we might start to understand them in a different way; to see parents, for example, as "harried, well-intentioned individuals struggling with the same overwhelming facts of the human condition that one faces oneself" (words quoted over morning tea by an unknown participant at a large scale management symposium, but unattributed and of unknown source). Compassionate regard for the past, based on insight developed in the present, can in turn bring back into the present insight and possibilities for action that were not in existence before the excursion into the past was made.

The excursion of the last six years has brought new insight, for me, to words I had been familiar with for some time and which were quoted at the beginning of this thesis: "Life is not just the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know" (Milner, 1936).

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Prologue

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
>
> T.S. Eliot
> "Little Gidding. The Four Quartets," 1943, p38

The experience of writing a thesis is a very personal and private one – each one "unique" in the twists and turns of its creation, as well as in the end product offered to the world. From my own experience in writing two theses, and helping many other people to produce theirs, I've noticed two very different phases – times when thinking

and writing become almost an obsession, something that can't be left alone until that "bit" is "done"; and times when the thought, let alone the art, of thinking and writing is pushed away – either from boredom or because it has become "too hard." There are, of course, some "in-between" phases when one writes steadily and methodically without either great excitement or boredom – it becomes another job of work, to be carried out with detached interest.

In one or other of these phases – for me, it was an "obsessive" phase – the writer is suddenly confronted with the question: what am I really writing about? What is the key issue or question I'm investigating? In the kind of action research (Lewin, 1946) described in this thesis, this is perhaps more likely to happen than in others – particularly those devoted to testing a specific hypothesis.

To have that question intrude itself again and again, is very much part of the action research methodology, since as a method of investigation it asks that a theory or invention or plan be checked against experience, and that experience be informed and enriched by theory and planning.

What is truly disconcerting is to think that one is more or less "on track" with a research design and then discover that what is being "found out" is really quite different from what you thought you were doing. I usually say as much to students at the start of the academic year: "You may think you are investigating and implementing a strategy for improving customer service and discover that you are really engaged in the management of internal politics and a personal fight for survival."

How often do we give to other people the advice we most need to take ourselves? At several times in the last four or five years, my confidence in the integrity and quality of my work as a practitioner, let alone as a researcher, has been severely shaken by experiences which have left me saying to myself: "I don't know what I'm doing; I

shouldn't be let loose with people until I've worked this out; I'm not equal to the task."

The act of writing the narrative of the thesis has itself triggered some of these crises of confidence – when I became aware that what I was wrestling with something that was much bigger or harder than anything I imagined at the beginning, which I could only catch elusive glimpses of and which was both exhilarating and frustrating at the same time.

It would be honest to say that I didn't really know what I was "on" about until the last few months during the final writing stages. Again, I had neglected the advice – so often given to others – that there is an "inner" and an "outer" journey to be taken in action research. By the "outer" journey I mean the task or intervention or piece of work being done by the practitioner – whether manager, change-agent or researcher. By the "inner" journey I mean the discovery of how the practitioner operates to achieve that task – not just the strategies and techniques used, but the skills, and qualities and "mental models" (Argyris & Schon, 1978) which make up and guide an individual's behaviour and the way they practice their craft.

One of my graduate students (Percy, 1993) expressed this idea in the notion of the "layers of work" to be done in the course of action research. Her layers of the work include:

- the day-to-day work undertaken by the change-agent and others in the external world: the plans made, meetings attended, reports written, techniques and strategies used to get things done and make things happen;

- the work of understanding the multiple – and sometimes contradictory or paradoxical – perceptions of that work by the players involved;

- the work of using those contradictions and paradoxes to illuminate, guide and refine what is undertaken in the external world by the change-agent and others;

- the work of building knowledge, understanding – and even theory – which can enhance and enrich the future practice of the change-agent.

This is a useful way of describing the many different levels of work which action research encompasses.

For the research student, a key challenge is to understand when one is undertaking the different kinds of work, and to recognize the tensions and opportunities which arise as the different kinds of work mingle and at times "collide" with one another.

For me, an early collision came with the recognition that the methodologies used to "research my topic" were themselves the subject of the research. My thesis topic – one aspect of how managers learn – has been primarily about the use of action research and learning methodologies. So in practice, action research and learning methodologies were being used to study action research and learning methodologies.

It is the nature of action research to accomplish something for a client, to enhance understanding and knowledge of what has happened and develop the capacity of both client and researcher to do "it" – or something like it – again in the future (Rapaport, 1970). As a result of engaging in action research, the practice changes.

Over time, in the course of this work, the way I practise my craft has changed and so, inevitably, has my research methodology.

This happened slowly, on a day-to-day and month-to-month basis; there was no obvious or deafening "collision" to alert me to the fact until one of the periodic "times of

reckoning" which were built into the research design arrived – a time (scheduled every 6 months) for production of a narrative which would assess and integrate the work done over the preceding months. This particular "time of reckoning" occurred after four years of work had been undertaken. It became startlingly obvious that the research methodology had developed substantially – in parallel with changes in my practice. The production of a narrative as a research methodology (Yin, 1987) had become increasingly important to me, just as narrative and story-telling had become important in my day-to-day work and practice.

My supervisor was as disconcerted as I was, since at that stage neither of us had seriously explored the literature on biography and story-telling as methods of reflection in research. It felt to me as though I had been confidently walking along a path, putting one step firmly and easily in front of another, and then had suddenly looked down and seen that I was in fact walking along a very narrow track, with a sheer drop to the rocks many hundreds of feet below. That is a somewhat hackneyed image, but it very accurately conveys the experience I had – a dizzying sensation that what I and my supervisor thought I had been doing had become something very different. I do not mean that I had abandoned my original research design and the techniques that I had chosen to use – but that they had become gradually transformed as I worked with them, and I had not realised how much they had changed until I looked closely at the "before" and "after" photographs (to switch metaphors).

As Percy (1993) would have put it, part of "the real work" had only just become clear to me – that I had to acknowledge and take responsibility for "re-inventing" my research methodology, along with my practice.

In addition to the use being made of narrative, just described, that also meant acknowledging that the subject of this research has really been myself – albeit, myself at work with others. It is the story of the development of some central features

of my own practice – those that have to do with helping people to use reflection to enhance self-understanding and through that to effect behavioural change.

The development of self-understanding is indeed "real work" for most of us. The development of techniques which can enhance this kind of self-understanding have occupied the minds of psychologists, philosophers, theologians and social-workers – among others – for generations. I have taken a fraction of that work and tried to use it to enhance the set of techniques which I use in my own practice. In doing so, and with the help of colleagues and clients, I have developed some techniques of my own – things which I have tried to perfect by submitting them to the rigours of day-to-day usage, sometimes as an academic educator, but most frequently in the commercial market place as a consultant.

In developing the techniques, I also refined my constructs about why and how they work. Again, this conceptual development is something that evolved gradually, without my being conscious that I was doing it until some way down the path. So this thesis also tells the story of how that happened, in the context of action research.

Turner (1989) in a wonderful little book called *The Way of the Thesis* has compared a dissertation to a piece of stout rope. One should be able to pull on the rope at any point and find that it doesn't come away in one's hand – that it is an integral part of the whole. The central task of the thesis writer is to discover what the "whole" is – and to weave a stout rope in which each strand is closely intertwined and connected. My rope, my "contention" if you like, is that through self-reflection it is possible to attain understanding which frees us to act in ways that are different from our previous ways of acting – in other words, to learn. As a corollary to this, I contend that the act of self-understanding is a creative one – we "invent" ourselves, as well as discovering or "finding" ourselves. This can be paradoxical in exactly the way that T.S. Eliot's words – quoted at the beginning – are paradoxical. In the act of re-invention, of starting anew,

we may find that we are finally re-discovering what was there all the time.

To facilitate the development of self-understanding in another person is also to engage in an act of creation. Similarly, to engage in action research is to engage in a sustained creative effort, as well as to "discover" something. The discovery and creation of meaning or understanding through reflection are explored in this thesis from three perspectives: as a technique for research and the development of collective knowledge (Chapter 2); as an avenue for personal change and learning (Chapter 3); and as a means of developing one's professional craft or practice (Chapters 4 and 5).

These three facets of exploration – which was undertaken through the vehicles of action learning (Revans, 1980) and action research (Levin, 1946) – had three related outcomes:

- the review and refinement of some of the theoretical constructs used by this writer and other practitioners and theorists which help to describe and explain the phenomenon of reflection-based learning;

- the enhancement of the practical, reflection-based techniques used by this writer to facilitate the development of managers;

- the documentation of a case-study in which reflective techniques were themselves applied by the writer to the development of her personal praxis as she attempted to integrate her conceptual understanding and practical application of reflection.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

The starting point

This project began with a series of questions which were asked by a "management educator" – someone who saw herself having a role to play in the development of adult managers.

That person – the present writer – had worked with many managers at all levels in both the private and the public sectors in Australia over a twenty year period. As a result of these experiences – which included managing other managers, consulting to managers and taking on the role of trainer and educator – there were many obvious questions to be asked.

One of the most central was:

- How can adults – and particularly managers – be effectively helped when they seriously consider changing their behaviour and attempting to do things or think about things in new or modified ways?

This is not a new question, nor is it particular to the development of managers. Since people have been capable of reflecting about themselves and others, they have asked related questions: "How do I get them interested in learning this?", "How do I teach this skill?", "How can I best lead this organisation toward the achievement of a new vision?", "What will it take to make him change his ways?", "How will we change the culture in this organisation?", "What would it take to get this team really firing?", "How can I help her deal with this self-defeating behaviour?"

The business of somehow getting people to change their behaviour preoccupies

teachers, spouses, parents, dietitians, doctors, therapists, consultants, ministers of religion, basketball coaches and aspiring golfers, to mention but a few.

The scale of change can range from the redirection and repositioning of a major business, the development of a nation, the curing of alcoholism or the saving of a marriage, to taking up a hobby or learning to drive.

Developing the skills and behaviour of adult managers poses some particular challenges. What does it take to get a competent and experienced manager to consider doing something differently? Most have already developed *characteristic ways of doing things* – defined here as sets of practised skills and habits which are automatically brought into play to deal with the situations and issues they find themselves dealing with at work. Some of these will have been consciously and deliberately learned; others will reflect the slow incremental accumulation of day-to-day routine, barely acknowledged or reflected upon. But simple observation affirms that most adult managers either "do what comes naturally" or "lead with their strengths" – the tried and true repertoire that works.

All that is perfectly understandable – after all, why experiment for the sake of it, even if one had the time? It makes sense that when we are on a good thing, we stick to it.

But, the questions remain – under what circumstances do managers think about doing things differently? and how do other people hinder and help them when they try? How, for that matter, do they help and hinder themselves?

<u>The scope and rationale of the project</u>

As the project unfolded, the initial line of inquiry created so many possibilities for reading, thinking and practice that it had eventually to be contained and focused. The

disciplines of management, education and psychology are all relevant and important, and all offer many models, theories and concepts which try to describe and explain the processes through which adults learn and change their behaviour. This made the literature review enormous in its potential.

The managers, consultants and academics with whom the present writer worked did not limit themselves even to those possibilities. The fields of economics, religion, literature, art and psychiatry had all been seminal in the language and concepts they used to describe and explain their experiences and ideas.

As the writer listened to and worked with others, it became important not just to understand the words and ideas, but also the beliefs that lay behind them. Each carried around a set of what Argyris and Schon (1978) call implicit theories – sometimes acknowledged and articulated, often not – which they used to make sense of their experience, and sometimes as a basis for taking action.

These individuals were involved in taking many actions designed to influence the behaviour of others: creating goals and strategies to focus and guide the efforts and activities of large and small groups; developing strategies to fundamentally change the work practices and behaviours of people at work; finding ways to improve personal productivity; and helping people to plan and manage their own learning, as well as the learning and development of their own teams.

Having read and heard the words of others, the essential issues for the writer's own behaviour as a practitioner were more sharply and richly defined. Her own implicit beliefs and theories had first to be articulated and acknowledged, next to be tested and then modified, extended or discarded.

There are many different questions and issues with which one is confronted if one

thinks seriously about the actions one takes in attempting the development of managers: must an experienced manager be "ready" to learn or change, before I or anybody else can hope to help them learn or change? how would I or they be able to recognise their "readiness"? behavioural change be accelerated *significantly* by anything I do or say? how? how – if at all – is its quality and depth significantly improved or otherwise altered by my interventions? what blocks or inhibits learning and behavioural change? how do I recognise and help to deal with those blocks, including the ones that come from within the person, or from within myself?

All of these questions, one way or another, are ways of asking other, more fundamental questions: why do we do what we do? does it work? and why does it work?

These may be seemingly obvious questions for a practitioner in the field of management consultancy and development – or, for adult educators in any field, be it engineering, medicine or social work. While they may be obvious, they are some of the questions which this writer continues to find challenging, as do most of her colleagues and – judging by the management development literature – many others practising and writing in this field. Unlike primary and secondary school teachers, who are perforce exposed to theories of child development and educational practice, consultants and academics are not necessarily acquainted with theories of how people learn, or even with the basic techniques which might be covered in "trainer training". In the field of management, it is quite possible to "teach" management theory and practice without thinking too much about how managers, in practice, learn to be good managers, or bad ones.

Many of those encountered during the course of this research had, in fact, thought about these questions a good deal, but still found it difficult to articulate their thinking. Most, in fact, described their thinking as still evolving and themselves as still being in search of the answers. All acknowledged that the issues have important practical implications, given that the capacity to continuously learn and change is perhaps the only thing which

gives organisations and individuals a sustained competitive edge in a constantly changing and increasingly complex world.

It is also of practical importance given the sustained interest in management education in this country as in others. The challenge to "get it right" continues to confront us, no less than it did ten years ago when Hayes and Abernathy (1980) published their landmark critique of business schools entitled "Managing Our Way to Economic Decline". Their central observation was that an obsession with technique – without the development of wisdom which drives and harnesses technique effectively – produces graduates of business schools who are not equipped to cope with, let alone lead others through, the kind of economic and technological change which confronts individuals and organisations at this time in our history.

While it can be interesting and stimulating to produce debate for debate's sake, the whole subject of enhancing adult learning – and particularly the learning of adult managers – is not one that falls into that category, or into the "nice to know" category. This writer would argue that the capacity to effectively manage and enhance learning is one of the critical success factors which makes or breaks both individuals and organisations. At the close of the twentieth century, given the power of what Freed (1993) has called "relentless innovation" as a source of global competitiveness, it also has the capacity to make or break nations.

Closer to home the writer – and her academic colleagues – had another reason for being interested in the answers to these questions. For some years, the Faculty of Business at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology – and in particular, its Department of Management – has offered graduate courses which take Malcolm Knowles' (1978) concept of the adult learner very seriously, using action research and learning concepts as the fundamental tools of management development (see Prideaux & Ford, 1988). As indicated in the prologue, this project involved using the Department's "own" research

and learning methodologies to investigate and hopefully enrich the application of those same methodologies. For the life of the project – and very likely beyond it – the writer has tried to use the techniques she offers – and at times imposes – on her students and clients, particularly techniques for reflecting on experience. Like her colleagues, she had a profound interest in finding out whether and how they work, and how they might be made to work even more effectively.

Specifically this writer became very interested in understanding how and why reflection helps the learning process; in developing and refining practical reflection techniques which she and others could use to enhance their learning; and in using reflection to enhance the *integration* of her understanding with her practice. These are the central themes of this thesis.

Methodology

The research strategy being employed is a variation of the action research methodology introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1946, as a way of combining action – especially the achievement of social and organisational change – with the generation of knowledge and theory.

The process of action research can be described as a cycle of planning, action, and review of the action, resulting in other continuing and iterative cycles of planning, action and review. It incorporates both inductive and deductive methods of reasoning and logical analysis, and is undertaken in company with others who have a stakeholding or interest in the outcome – clients, sometimes colleagues, sometimes host organisations or communities.

During the action research cycle, experience is continually re-cycled; earlier experiences and data are re-visited in the light of accumulated data; new action is

planned in the light of what went on before, and all experiences are systematically reviewed and evaluated.

Susman and Evered (1978) suggest that this is a particularly appropriate form of research when the unit of analysis is, like the researcher, a self-reflecting subject (that is, a person); when understanding of the phenomenon under investigation cannot be developed without the active co-operation of the subject; and when central research questions issues are themselves likely to be fully defined only by sustained exposure to and involvement with the subject over a long period of time.

Key elements of the research, which are explored in more detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis, were:

- planned and unplanned dialogue with others (colleagues, clients and students);

- review and integration of a significant body of literature on the use of reflection in action research and action learning;

- the documentation of a case-study in the application of self reflective techniques to the development of one's own praxis, where the researcher is the subject of the research.

From the very beginning of the study, the writer has been aware of a pre-occupation with methodology which has never "gone away". This was initially because of a self-consciousness in using action research methodology at Doctoral level – a self-consciousness very nicely acknowledged – and administered to! – by Bob Dick (1992) in his book *You Want to Do an Action Research Thesis?*

The methodology chapter in this thesis is quite long – not because it spends a lot of time justifying the methodology, but because the research itself generated a great many

questions and issues about research methodology. This is understandable, in retrospect, given that action research and learning were being used to explore action research and learning. The questions being asked by the practitioners were not just questions about how to do things (in this case, how to learn) but questions about how we generate understanding; whether knowledge – including knowledge of oneself – is created or discovered. These are the great questions of ontology (the nature of "reality") and epistemology (the methods for understanding or "knowing" reality).

These questions are of interest in their own right and arguably should be thoroughly explored by anyone who presumes to call themselves a researcher, no matter what their discipline or research subject. But in this project, the issues were of fundamental interest, because the research started to focus on very particular concerns:

- how and why does reflection help us to develop our understanding of ourselves in ways that help us to learn?

- what practical reflective techniques work?

- how do our tacit or implicit "theories" about ourselves guide our behaviour, and does it help to make implicit theories (Argyris & Schon, 1978) explicit?

- how can the practitioner – the educator or facilitator of learning in others – use reflection to understand and develop his or her own practice, with its suite of acknowledged and unacknowledged "theories", and to effectively integrate those theories with practice?

- and how does the researcher tap into, make use of, test and perhaps refine the stock of existing theory and knowledge?

The methodological challenges involved in studying any aspect of human behaviour are immense. Even the most casual glance at the history of contemporary psychology alerts one to the great debates that have raged – and continue to rage – over what is "acceptable" methodology. Georgi (1993, p3) has very elegantly described what he calls the "ultimate contradiction" which has been a major product of this debate: "mainstream" psychological research retains its commitment to a theoretical model and research strategy which in principle excludes the phenomenon of consciousness and uses it to study persons with consciousness. Action research was selected for this project primarily because, in the perception of the writer, it does justice to the complexity and nature of the subject being explored.

The selection of a research methodology is not the first methodological issue which confronts the researcher. The selection of a topic is an "ontological action" – so this writer had already raised some serious methodological issues in defining "how managers learn" as her broad sphere of interest, in her declared interest in "adult learning" and "action learning" – even in the way she had defined learning. The first "knowledge question" which confronts the researcher is not always acknowledged and it is not just *what* are you interested in studying but *why?* If asked, the question is often answered with a general statement of rationale (such as was offered earlier in this chapter) but as a knowledge question (an ontological question) the real question is: why are *you*, at this point in time, interested in this question, and what are the ideas and assumptions (implicit and explicit) that you bring to your work on it? Chapter 4 tries to answer that question by locating the researcher in time and place and making her biases and assumptions explicit.

Chapter 2 is long because it also describes the specific techniques and methods used to generate experience, collect data, reflect on it, interpret and analyse it, and plan further action. It would be usual to spend some time in a methodology chapter describing the research tools used because they powerfully influence what is discovered and created,

and the rigour with which this is done.

For the action researcher, selecting the tools carefully, and using them "knowingly" and keeping them finely honed is particularly important – because the researcher's own behaviour and practice becomes the subject of research. One is examining oneself – as well as others – in action, and the effectiveness of that action. The researcher is also examining the knowledge, theories, ideas and assumptions that generated his or her own behaviour – and possibly the behaviour of others, and exploring the need to extend or change them. The tools of action research must be kept in good order at all times, if they are to withstand the inner and outer journeys described in the prologue, and the "layers of work" identified by Percy (1993). In this particular piece of action research, the development of elements of the researcher's praxis quite explicitly became the subject of sustained reflection.

But again, this part of the thesis has taken longer than is perhaps usual because in this case, the research tools are also the tools of trade of the practitioner. The techniques used for research in this case are precisely the tools used to help people manage their own learning. Tools for generating and planning experience and for reflecting on that experience are the stock-in-trade of the writer. To see and use the same tools for research meant holding them up to the light and examining – and appreciating them – from a different perspective. The writer had to consider their epistemological significance – and it took a long time! However, it was also important, as a direct product of the project, to write down the result of that examination. Chapter 2 is the place in the thesis where that happens.

The sources of the data

Over a five year period, the writer both discovered and created a huge volume of

qualitative data, drawn from day-to-day experience; both planned and unplanned; from some deliberately constructed interventions; and from a continuing program of literature review.

The major data are the researcher's own experiences in consulting to organisations and individual managers; managing the Master of Business in Management for the Faculty of Business at the RMIT and supervising Master's candidates in the same program. These data have been created and evaluated through the process of action research, with particular emphasis on the use of "action-reflection" learning (Marsick et al, 1992). Using this method, the social researcher is behaving like a scientist at the bench, actively engaged in observing phenomenon, recording and reflecting upon what has been observed, experimenting with and adjusting the interventions made and subjecting the results of these interventions to repeated cycles of observation and analysis, including systematic feedback from and evaluation by others.

The second major source of data – analysed in the same way – was a series of ongoing co-operative practice and inquiry sessions with academic staff in the Faculty of Business at the RMIT and with colleagues working as private practitioners in the field of management development. These have been used to explore the way in which the researcher developed her understanding and use of reflection as a way of facilitating learning, and her "theory" about how and why those techniques work.

The final source of data has been the review of literature relating to the application of reflection in action research and action learning.

Since action research focuses on "real life", it has the capacity to generate a quantity of data that can be overwhelming. In the course of this research program, the writer undertook consultancy work with three hundred and eighteen different organisations and groups, including contact with approximately three and a half thousand individuals.

She conducted eighty classes for thirty seven candidates for the Master of Business in Management – each of whom was undertaking an action research program of twelve months' duration. She personally supervised twelve of these candidates. She had dozens of conversations – planned and unplanned – with academic and consultant colleagues, and planned interviews with managers about their learning experiences.

Chapter 2 (the chapter on methodology) describes in more detail how these data were created, accessed, recorded and analysed. In Chapter 4, the data themselves are described – in other words, the writer tells the story, in the first person, of how she learned and how her praxis – both theory and practice was developed.

The literature

The literature was used in a number of ways during this study. A common way to tackle it is to attempt to become an expert in the particular subject being studied. Since the potentially relevant literature was enormous, the writer cannot claim to have become an expert on all of it. She approached the literature with the mental set that it could help in two ways:

- as a guide to action; taking the advice of other people who have already thought about the subject and tried to take useful action themselves;

- as a way of making sense of the researcher's own experience: using the ideas and concepts developed by others to help interpret the experiences and data generated through the project.

In the event, encounters with the literature provided a powerful stimulant to developing both her conceptual understanding and her practice. This thesis makes very significant use of the literature and it needs to be emphasised that the reading of the literature and

the reviewing of, and writing about that literature, was as important in the development of this writer's praxis as the practical experience of "doing" things.

A powerful result of systematically reading the literature – particularly in a field such as adult learning which is being added to weekly – can be to force individuals to put their own efforts and understanding in context, to locate themselves and the work on the current knowledge map. The writer's own experience as practitioner and investigator was – and continues to be – that of "picking up pebbles on the beach of knowledge" and being aware of just how vast and uncontainable the beach seems to be.

The course of the literature review (contained in Chapters 2, 3 and 5) both reflected and directed the action research program. It took two parallel courses. One was the review of literature relating to methodology, which has already been outlined, and which is contained in Chapter 2. The focus there is on reflection as a technique for research and the development of collective knowledge. The second course of the literature, contained in Chapters 3 and 5, is on reflection as a technique to assist learning – both one's own learning and that of others. It begins with a review of the implication for organisational and individual learning of the so-called age of discontinuity and information (Drucker, 1969). The literature on adult learning has been added to considerably since Knowles (1978) wrote his land-mark book, while the literature on organisational learning continues to grow at a very great rate. Much of the literature reinforces the importance of learning as a capability, both for individuals and organisations (for example, Senge, 1990) and explores some of the ways in which this learning might be facilitated.

However, as already indicated, this writer was becoming increasingly interested in a particular aspect of adult learning. The questions and issues were increasingly about how individuals change themselves; about what's going on when an adult tries to use self-understanding as a tool for learning and change; how self-understanding is created;

how meaning is applied to one's experiences of oneself. This led to the writer re-visiting the psychological literature on counselling as a means of behavioural change – particularly the work of Carl Rogers (1961), Robert Carkhuff (1989) and the Gestalt school (for example, Goodman et al, 1972).

Seen from this perspective – and as signalled earlier – the creation of meaning is both a learning issue and a research issue. As a result, a great deal of reading was undertaken in the literature on research methodologies – particularly that part of the literature which acknowledges the creation of personal meaning as an element in research (for example, Morgan, 1983) and explores the "management" of subjectivity as part of the inquiry process (for example, Reason, 1988).

Intertwined with this was reading on the ways in which we construct and access "implicit themes" (Argyris & Schon, 1978) and "defensive routines" (Argyris, 1990) as a means of learning. Also of relevance was Gendlin's (1970) work on the mechanisms through which the application of words to capture human experience actually changes that experience in therapeutic and counselling interventions.

This line of thinking eventually led to the literature concerned with story-telling, story-writing, biography and auto-biography (for example, Jones, 1983; Hankiss, 1981; and Ferrarotti, 1981), as tools for developing personal meaning as well as collective wisdom. It "ended" (at the time of writing) in the work of the Jungian tradition in the exploration of myths and archetypical stories as sources of self-understanding (for example, Estes, 1992).

In the course of a very diverse program of reading – often stimulated and driven as much by the interests of my colleagues as by my own "planned" reading schedule – the work of Donald Schon on *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987) stood out as somehow capturing the essence or "the heart" of the issue for this writer. Schon

explores the facilitation of adult learning through what he calls "reflection-in-action" – a dialogue between facilitator and learner, in which the learner experiments, takes action, reflects (both alone and in dialogue with the facilitator) and submits reflection to further experience. He suggests that the skilled behaviour which we associate with the arts, with craft industries and with the traditional professions cannot be "taught" in a literal sense. The dialogue is not about prescription or rule-giving, but it is about creating or crafting something which emerges gradually, individualistically and on the basis of extensive and disciplined practice. It is not about one person simply handing to another a blue-print or vision of effective performance. The vision – if it exists – is often difficult to articulate, let alone to share or prescribe. The discipline is that of reflection, close attention to the experience, the "doing" and the remembering.

Schon's examples – which also serve as metaphors – are the "Master Class" in musical performance, the architectural studio and the Master craftsman. The notion of craft brings together the paradigms of science, the arts and of sporting achievement: the basic training in rules, techniques, laws, procedures, theorems and formulae; the patient and determined repetition and continued practice, transformed into art by the wisdom which knows when to abandon or modify or stick to the rules; and the instinct which takes over the process and makes it truly the expression of an individual, not just the product of a mass-production assembly line.

When applied to the development of management skill, this metaphor has considerable power. The notion of management as a craft has been explored by Mintzberg (1987) in another context. In his thinking, as in Schon's, the central concept is that of something which emerges – which is literally crafted – from the overlay of experience or intentions, from the ability to take the clay of "raw" data from the past and present and use it to advantage for learning and gradually shaping the future; working carefully with what is, while nurturing and shaping the possibilities for what might be.

Mintzberg was writing of organisations, not just of individuals, and reflecting on the processes of organisational and strategic planning when he wrote:

> As Kierkegaard once observed, life is lived forward but understood backward. Managers may have to live strategy in the future, but they must understand it through the past.
>
> Like potters at the wheel, organisations must make sense of the past if they hope to manage the future. Only by coming to understand the patterns that form in their own behaviour do they get to know their capabilities and their potential. This crafting strategy, like managing craft, requires a natural synthesis of the future, present and the past (Mintzberg, 1987, p75).

The outcomes

Chapter 6 summarises the major outcomes of the study, which were:

- significant development in the reflective techniques offered by the writer to others as a means of developing self-understanding, and used on and by herself for the same purpose; the techniques developed include the development of a "diagnostic map" and the identification of "personal scripts", supported by the use of listening skills, story-telling, story-writing, metaphor construction and journal work;

- refinement of the constructs used by the writer to understand how self-directed behavioural change can be assisted by the use of reflective techniques;

- effective integration of both her techniques and her constructs to form an articulated praxis, as attested by the evaluations of self and others.

The concepts used to explain how techniques work involve application of Gestalt notions of psycho-dynamic change (Goodman et al, 1972). A key concept takes the form of a paradox: the contention that self-directed behavioural change is likely to be

enhanced when we seek not to change ourselves but to simply gain insight into and respect for what already exists. Put simply: we can change only when we are truly ourselves. Perls (1969) has suggested that most attempts at self-improvement are futile, because in trying to improve, the person is focussing on a Gestalt about "trying" that will never be finished. When the person stops attempting to improve or change, and allows him or herself to be exactly what he or she is, the way is open to confront unfinished Gestalten. Perls took the view that the only way unfinished Gestalten may be completed is by affirming the truth, no matter what it is.

The Gestalt therapist observes the person as he or she describes the problem or issue, looking for the underlying process by which the person is maintaining whatever inner state of anxiety, confusion, depression or conflict which is blocking behavioural change. The acts of *attending* and *listening* by the helper-practitioner are important in revealing what the person is actually doing – and may be as important, or more important, that what they are saying.

The work of Gendlin (1970) has also been very seminal in the development of the present writer's thinking. He offers a framework which brings together a number of ideas: the power of the act of attending to another; the paradox of change already described: that to "move on" in understanding one must first "go in" to self and experience; the concept of leverage (small subtle shifts in thought or action which have high impact on self and others); the importance of reflection itself as a way of transforming tacit "knowingness" into explicit, articulated understanding; and the value of metaphor in achieving the latter.

The "leap" made by this writer is that these concepts are not only applicable in the therapeutic situation, but potentially in any situation where self-directed behavioural change is being attempted. At the very least, they help to explain why reflective techniques work. At best, they suggest how these techniques can be extended and

refined in their application.

As well as the refinement of techniques and concepts, this writer has attempted to integrate personal technique and theory into her praxis. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines praxis as "accepted practice, custom; set of examples for practice", and its derivation from a Greek word for "doing". It is a term used in some professions – such as social work – to describe a set of practices or customs prescribed and endorsed by the whole profession or by specialisations and sub-groups within it.

The present writer has defined praxis as the integration of opportunities and chances for action based on the surfacing of and acknowledgment of individual and collective ways of thinking and behaviour. In simple terms, praxis is what results when action is informed and enriched by asking the question: why am I doing what I'm doing? why do I think this will be appropriate or effective?

Revans (1982, p493) has this to say about what he calls "the science of praxeology":

> The science of praxeology – or the theory of practice – remains among the underdeveloped regions of the academic world. And yet it is, or should be, the queen of all, settling the ancient argument about the relative natures of nominalism and realism, bringing Plato, St Dominic and Descartes into the same camp as Aristotle, St Francis and Locke. For successful theory is merely that which enables him who is suitably armed to carry through successful practice. This is the argument of the pragmatists, William James, John Dewey and even Karl Marx: to understand an idea one must be able to apply it in practice, and to understand a situation one must be able to change it. Verbal description is not command enough. It is from consistently replicated and successful practice that is distilled and concentrated on the knowledge we describe as successful theory.

It is probably already evident that the work of Schon (1987) and Mintzberg (1987) fired this writer's imagination very vividly, given the metaphors they use to elaborate the way in which praxis is developed. In Chapter 3 Schon's approach to the development of praxis is explored in some detail.

For the writer, the pursuit of a praxis which would be endorsed and adhered to by the whole profession of management consultants and educators seemed ambitious and presumptuous. However, she did want to clarify the practices and customs which, over the years, she had come to endorse as being appropriate for her. And she wanted to go further and try to articulate the principles which drive those practices and customs.

The first thing was to acknowledge and clearly articulate why this practitioner does what she does – what drives her to select one technique rather than another in facilitating the development in others. In surfacing and naming what can otherwise be habitual, unconscious or instinctive behaviour, the practitioner takes greater conscious responsibility for what is done with, for or to clients and what clients are able to do with, for and to her.

The second was to face a systematic examination of the gap between the theory or idea which is espoused by the practitioner and the theory-in-use – the actual behaviour which she practices (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Gaps of this kind may be more apparent to others than to the practitioner and be a source of confusion for both – since the other may be taken by surprise by the discrepancy and the practitioner may be bewildered when the impacts of her own behaviour do not match the ideas and ideals which she thought drove them. To achieve total consistency between the espoused theory and the theory- in-use might well be a goal that is forever just out of reach, but it made – and continues to make – sense to try.

A third reason was to throw light on experience which is confusing and on problems which don't seem to have obvious answers. Sometimes that confusion or that problematic experience is the direct result of the way we think about people and issues, the assumptions we make about them and the way we behave toward them. Morgan (1983) has observed that in research, as in life, we "meet ourselves". The practitioner, no less than the researcher, contributes to the creation of his or her professional

experience. When experience – which we have generated by our own actions – jumps up and bites us in unexpected ways, we may experience what Argyris and Schon (1978) have called a "dilemma of effectiveness". This happens when our "theories" (which we might or might not have articulated to ourselves and others) fail because they have failed to effectively predict or influence the behaviour of other people.

A fourth reason for doing this was to provide guides for action – to be able to offer cues to oneself, particularly in difficult situations, that might offer sign-posts or at least options as to what to do next. And to be able to give clear messages about what is being proposed or has been done, and why.

A fifth reason was to be able to offer something which would be helpful in guiding others – students and clients who wanted not just to have things done to them but to be able to do those things for themselves, long after the teacher or consultant had gone.

Closely related to the previous two, a sixth reason was to use experience and practice to refine the practitioner's understanding and theory, and to use theory and understanding – her own and other people's – to inform and enrich her practice. The outcome, hopefully, was the refinement of both theory and practice in ways that will be useful to others.

All this might seem at odds with Schon's metaphor of the craft, and the vision which is often difficult to articulate, let alone share or describe. In fact, it was not with the intention of finding a definitive or prescriptive blue-print for performance – her own or anybody else's – that the attempt at clarification of the praxis was made. Indeed, it became clear to the writer that a praxis can become a prison if it is used to limit rather than enlighten the choices available; and if, to draw on Schon again, instinct is not allowed to combine with disciplined and well-learned technique.

It was started more in the manner of a "stock-take" – a labelling and counting over of the concepts and techniques used and the experiences generated by them. The counting over led to re-arranging and the re-discovery of things once known and used but now sitting forgotten at the back of a cupboard. As time went on, the metaphor which became more appropriate was that of polishing spectacles or clearing the mist from the windscreen – trying to see more clearly what was happening and why. It was as though, having labelled all the obvious things, the search shifted to what was less obvious. The writer started to ask more searching questions about why she does the things she does.

After many attempts at vigorous, focused rubbing on the glass the metaphor was changed again.

Marion Milner has written: "Life is not just the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know" (Milner, 1936). This process of slow revelation is very different from the sudden blinding flash of insight or inspiration which one sometimes prays for in a moment of crisis. A more delicate metaphor perhaps captures what happened next: it was like discerning the fragile outline of a pattern seen through trembling water, of glimpsing shapes and connections and meanings, half recognising and remembering things, and sometimes seeing the whole and sometimes the part.

The deeper and longer the search became the more variable the clarity and quality of the pattern or vision seemed to be – at times, like a light burning very brightly and at other times dim, flickering and not illuminating much; at times going out altogether.

As the process of discovery is still continuing at the time of writing, the author can hardly claim to have "found" her personal praxis. Nor is the praxis one which saves her from uncertainty or fear when working with others, guarantees a planned outcome or

shuts out the creativity which comes from the interplay of imagination, feeling and intuition with logic, reason and judgement.

This thesis is the story of the search, so far, and is offered as a case-study in the application of sustained reflective techniques. As it has continued, the appropriateness of Mintzberg's picture of the potter at the wheel has become more evident to the writer. It isn't quite like finding buried treasure in a cave, or finally being able to hold the pattern up to the light and say: "So that's how it looks." It's much more like searching for something and creating something at the same time – like weaving a tapestry and working busily at the making hour after hour, seeing things in close-up, but then periodically walking away, standing back from the detailed experience, and seeing the picture emerge from the whole.

Chapter 2: Methodology: Reflection as a technique for research and the development of collective knowledge

In his post-graduate classes on social research methodology, Professor Norman Blaikie of the Faculty of Applied Social Science and Communications at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology offers a series of key questions to guide what he calls "professional practice and inquiry". The questions are intended as a basis for structuring any systematic piece of investigation or inquiry, in any discipline. They certainly provided a very useful framework for reviewing the issues of methodology relevant to this study.

The questions can be summed up as follows:

- What do I want to know?
- What counts as data?
- What do I want to do with the answers?
- How do I collect data?
- How do I make sense of it when I've collected it?

When supported by appropriate controls and rigour in the generation, collection and analysis of data, these questions become the basis for planning and implementing a research strategy.

They are also deceptively simple questions. To answer even the first two: "What do I want to know?" and "What counts as data?" requires the researcher not only to frame the subject matter of the research, but to think about the subject matter in ontological and epistemological terms – in other words, to ask: "What sort of subject matter am I dealing with?", "What sort of knowledge am I after?" Without well-thought out answers to these questions, the choice of a research paradigm is, arguably, a matter of whim and happenstance. To quote Morgan (1983, pp19-20):

> The selection of method implies some view of the situation being studied, for any decision on how to study a phenomenon carries with it certain assumptions, or explicit answers to the question, "What is being studied?". Just as we select a tennis racquet rather than a golf club to play tennis because we have a prior conception as to what the game of tennis involves, so too in relation to the process of social research, we select or favour particular kinds of methodology because we have implicit or explicit conceptions as to what we are trying to do in our research... When we frame understanding of the research process in these terms... we are encouraged to see the engagement entailing different relationships between theory and method, concept and object, and researcher and researched, rather than simply a choice about method alone.

This chapter begins with a review of the ontological and epistemological issues involved in selecting the research methodology, explains why this researcher selected the action research paradigm, and then describes the specific methodologies used within that paradigm. It continues with an analysis of the contribution of reflective techniques to research and the development of knowledge, particularly in terms of how they facilitate the creation of individual and collective learning. It includes an examination of the issues involved in using reflection as a means of researching the development of one's own praxis; and concludes with an account of the methodology employed as the basis for this thesis.

Choosing the right paradigm

a) Ontological and epistemological issues

To even acknowledge that one has a choice as to the research paradigm used is to plunge into significant ontological and epistemological debates – that is, debates about the nature of reality and how knowledge about reality is generated. A fundamental ontological question is whether "truth" or "reality" is something waiting "out there" to be found or revealed by investigative effort – realism – or whether human consciousness "creates" its own reality – nominalism (Hughes, 1980). A key epistemological question is whether knowledge is something objective, to be accumulated independently of the perceptions of any particular observer (as suggested by logical positivism, Comte, 1864) or something subjective, a product created by the observer. (The perspective of anti-positivists, including the interpretative viewpoint – see, for example, Lewin 1946 and Schutz, 1967.)

This is an enormous oversimplification of the "end" issues, since there are many variations at each "end" of these ontological and epistemological spectra. They are of practical as well as theoretical significance because different ontological and epistemological assumptions will suggest different paradigms and methodologies for the process of research. Logical positivism uses *inductive logic* in its methods of inquiry, typically involving the collection and classification of observations, the development of concepts and generalisations which would account for the observations and then the testing of those concepts. Critical rationalism, a later development of positivism, works in the opposite direction, so to speak. It employs *deductive logic* – the hypothetico-deductive-approach which begins with a theory, question or idea, draws some conclusions from the theory which can be tested, and conducts those tests by gathering data and observing outcomes. If the test fails, the theory is rejected. If it succeeds, the theory is supported but not "proven". (See Blaikie, 1991 for a more complete account.)

When the subject of research is human behaviour, the debate becomes even more interesting. The positivist view of the world is that social and psychological

phenomena can be defined and discovered in the same way as events in the natural world. "Reality consists essentially in what is available to the senses" (Hughes, 1980, p20), and is seen as having an existence external to and independent of the individual's view of it. Exploration of that reality requires objectivity and a process of scientific inquiry which is uncontaminated by the biases, values and perceptions of the observer. Only factors that can be directly observed and objectively measured form acceptable data. Structural functionalism is the research paradigm which meets the positivist's criteria for scientific inquiry and it is arguably the one which has dominated sociological and psychological inquiry in the first half of the twentieth century (Hughes, 1980).

As Jones (1985) points out, the desire to use positivist procedures in sociology has a long history. Comte (1864), who was the first to call the subject sociology, believed that the scientific method which had enabled humans to understand the laws governing nature would also reveal the laws of social behaviour. He considered that social structures are as given and pre-determined as any phenomenon in nature:

> Daffodils do not choose to be yellow, frogs do not choose to croak and have bulging eyes, water does not choose to freeze. They do nevertheless. This is just "how things are"... For (positivists) the same is true of society. We do not choose to believe the things we believe or to act in the way we act... Pre-existing cultural rules *determine* our ideas and behaviour through socialisation. Thus, in the same way as natural phenomena are the product of laws of nature, so people's ideas and actions are caused by those external social forces which make up social structures. Because of this similarity between the two kinds of subject matter – nature and society – the consensus theorist argues that the means by which they are investigated should be similar too (Jones, 1985, p83).

Comte's successor, Durkheim (1858-1917) rejected the idea that the social world can be investigated by reference to non-empirical phenomena. For him, behaviour is not caused by mysterious metaphysical, theological or psychological forces. Rather, society is a normative structure of "social factors" external to and constraining upon the individual:

This is the orthodox consensus position... the social world is a pre-existing cultural entity for its members... (and) since social facts exist independently of people's minds, they should be capable of being investigated independently of their minds too. That is, as factual, objective phenomena, they should be as capable of being observed empirically as are the equally objective and external phenomena which make up the natural world... Since behaviour and belief are

> determined by external structural forces, all we have to do is discover the number of times people do or say they think things. What we then have is empirical evidence of the forces that have produced this behaviour and belief. A social science can proceed just like a natural one. Hypotheses can be tested against empirical evidence... (Jones, 1985, p84).

The interpretivist view of the world is rather different, seeing "social reality" as fundamentally different to "reality" in the natural world on the grounds that it is socially constructed by actors in the situation. Berger and Luckman, (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality*, provide a powerful description of this process of construction.

Here, the task of the researcher is to discover the processes or mechanisms through which social actors develop and negotiate the meanings that guide their behaviour and make sense of their actions. Instead of the researcher approaching the subject with pre-determined theories about reality, "reality" is "pre-interpreted" by those one is observing (Blaikie, 1991). The researcher must immerse him or herself in the actors' world (as a participant observer), to attempt to get "inside" reality as defined by them so as to be able to identify and describe the actors' interpretations of reality and the processes by which they are constructed.

The logic process employed in this approach is the *abductive* or *dialogic* approach. It involves listening for and re-constructing the theories and constructs used by the actors, instead of imposing one's own theories or borrowing and applying the theories of others developed in other situations (Blaikie, 1980). The researcher begins by identifying the language used by the actors in ordinary day-to-day situations to describe and explain their experiences and concerns.

It might involve explaining what the actors seem to take for granted, their assumptions and beliefs. The researcher attends to the differences between his or her own way of seeing the world and theirs, and might ask: "What behaviour of theirs is challenging or

at odds with my own?" Blaikie (1980) describes these as first level (descriptive) constructs which are used by the researcher to generate second level (explanatory) constructs which have meaning and value within a technical framework or discipline area (such as sociology) to explain the "everyday life" of the actors. Schutz (1967) calls these "ideal types", and suggests that to be validated, they must meet the "postulate of adequacy" – that is, they must be recognisable or acceptable to the people or situations from which they are derived. The researcher must then check back to establish this adequacy, and in doing so, generally discovers new elements which must be incorporated into first and second level constructs. The dialogic is thus iterative in nature.

In choosing between the alternative paradigms, it is conventional to use criteria like reliability (can the findings it generates be replicated? will it generate enough "useable" data? are the data representative?); internal validity (are the conclusions warranted by the observations and data collected? is the logic involved systematic and vigorous?); face validity (is it a credible paradigm to use in the circumstances – in the eyes of the communities which judge the result of the research effort?); and generalisability (are the findings or conclusions drawn from this piece of research applicable anywhere else? do they help to understand other situations?).

Using those criteria, positivism and the structural functionalist research paradigm have had wide appeal in the scientific community, including the field of psychology, where the American behaviourist tradition (Watson, 1925) has led to a reliance on the hypothetico-deductive method as the major research paradigm in all but the European tradition of psychodynamic psychology.

However, these criteria omit the one attributed to Morgan (1983) at the start of the chapter: does the tool fit the job? In other words, does the research paradigm fit the phenomenon being investigated? and is it consistent with the researcher's

understanding of the "reality" being investigated?

This researcher was originally trained as an occupational psychologist and had seven years of undergraduate and post-graduate study in the field, together with five years of practice as a psychologist-researcher. Her reaction to the use of the structural functionalist research paradigm in the field of psychology is well summed up by Georgi's (1993) observation (cited earlier) of what he calls the ultimate contradiction: a theoretical model that in principle excludes the phenomenon of consciousness is being used to study persons with consciousness. In its original form (Watson, 1925) the behaviourist tradition firmly discounted mental phenomena as being even of relevance to the subject of human psychology – a view, ironically, that is contradicted by the very elaborate lengths to which experimental psychology goes to eliminate, or control for, the effects of the human experimenter.

For this writer, Georgi put it very well when he said:

> It is significant to note that psychology dates its beginning with the founding of a laboratory by Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig, Germany in 1879. The laboratory, after all, is the most potent symbol of the natural sciences. To most contemporary practitioners of the field, psychology came of age when it brought the "study of consciousness" into the laboratory. From the perspective of this writer, it was precisely such a move that has saddled psychology with an albatross that will hinder its development until it is discarded. A psychology that deals with humans ought to be a human science.
>
> Studying consciousness adequately in the laboratory implies that consciousness presents itself to us in everyday experience like a thing. Clearly this is not the case. Consciousness does not hold still for one to study and is better characterised as a stream, a flow, or a lived flux. It is precisely its "non-thing-like" character that impresses one. But since the laboratory was built in order to investigate nature more thoroughly, and is best suited for phenomena that fit the "thing-model", how could it also be the best place to study a phenomenon like consciousness which is essentially characterised as being the opposite of a thing? Part of the meaning of a thing, it should be noted, is that it is conceived to be without consciousness ..... Of course, the issue can be forced, and that indeed is what has been happening in mainstream psychology. A researcher will set up constant conditions with the assumption that consciousness, as a dependent variable, will respond to the conditions in a systematic and predictable way, as though it were merely a product of its conditions and externally dependent on them. What is captured by such a procedure is deemed

> to be psychological data and it is not realised that more has escaped the procedures than has been captured by them. This is the basis of reductionism in psychology.
>
> What needs to be added here is the fact that none of the historical definitions of psychology, experience, behaviour, or the unconscious behave differently from consciousness in such a setting. These phenomena do not manifest themselves like things: they would all demand descriptive properties quite different from the inertness of a thing. All of the above phenomena have to be understood in terms of intentionality, i.e. a directedness to events outside themselves that make them essentially different from things. Thus, what is demanded by the subject matter of psychology is rather an expansion of the conception of science that can appropriate such phenomena faithfully as well as a philosophy that can give legitimacy to such an expansion (Georgi, 1993, pp3-4).

The writer had not read Georgi at the outset of this study (Georgi didn't make his comments until five years later) but his words capture very accurately her reason for choosing to operate within the nominalist and anti-positivist frameworks and to choose a research paradigm consistent with them.

Since making that choice, she has read with interest Altichter's (1992) observations about the emergence of what D'Avis (1984) calls a "new unity of science". The contention here is that the sciences have moved a long way since the great epistemological and ontological debates started:

> *New findings and developments in natural sciences altered the image of its subject in such a way that it is necessary to revise its methodology.* (Italics his.) Strikingly enough, these changes acknowledge features of the subject which have previously been thought to be typical for social phenomena. Thus, the opportunity for a new unity of sciences emerges ..... Once it is acknowledged that there are processes in nature which are self-organising, unpredictable, complex, systemic, specific and unique, a range of new themes is introduced into natural sciences which have been thought before to belong exclusively to social sciences (Altrichter, 1992, pp85-86).

This has prompted Altrichter to speculate about what a new unity of sciences would mean for methodology. He suggests that an alternative methodology would include the following features:

- no general guiding rules for research:

  The methodology does not include a limited set of general rules by the help of which we can distinguish scientific from unscientific research, nor a firm foundation by the appeal to which we can secure the decency of our research even from the outset. The main intention of the methodology is ... to keep the space of research and insight open since it is aware of the fact that useful procedures and methods may be developed we cannot foresee, and also of the fact that procedures

> which we know to be problematic on a general level may be of limited worth in specific settings (Altrichter, 1992, p89).

This idea seems to be consistent with Morgan's (1983) concept of "fitness for purpose" mentioned earlier.

- research into one's research:

> Research is not the application of pre-specified methods, but it is methodological in itself, is essentially a reflexive endeavour ... the methods (chosen) are to be tested as much as the hypotheses offered and the conclusions reached (Altrichter, 1992, p89).

This shifts the burden to the researcher of not only carefully selecting methodologies and techniques but of evaluating their effectiveness. An attempt to do this in relation to the work contained in this thesis is made in Chapter 6. There were, however, some important choices that the researcher had to make at the outset – and during the progress of the research that need to be reviewed. These issues are explored in detail in this chapter.

b) Others issues in the choice of methodology

So far, however, the discussion has been entirely dominated by knowledge issues – by ontological and epistemological considerations. Morgan (1983) suggests that there are others which are important in the choice of methodology – such as ethical, ideological and political ones:

> If there are evaluative criteria that can be brought to bear on the nature of knowledge, they relate as much to the way knowledge serves to guide and shape ourselves as human beings – to the consequences of knowledge, in the sense of what knowledge does to and for humans – as to the idea that there are fixed points of reference against which knowledge can be judged "right", "wrong" or unambiguously "better than" (Morgan, 1983, p373).

The writer at first addressed these criteria in a pragmatic way, by asking the second of

Blaikie's questions listed at the beginning of the chapter: what do I want to do with the answers? Possible answers are: to *describe* something, to *explain* it, to *change* it or *make generalisations* about it or in some other way to *apply* or *exploit* the findings.

At the outset, this writer's needs included all of these things. She wanted to be able to *describe* more clearly the circumstances which suggest that an adult manager is ready to learn something or in some way extend his/her skill repertoire. She wanted to be able to capture the language which managers – and those who help them learn – use to *describe* their experiences of learning and their strategies for facilitating it. She wanted, in the end, to be able to more accurately describe her own experiences, ideas and strategies.

She also wanted to be able to *explain* things – in particular, to understand more about how and why learning and change processes work in adults. Finally, she was very interested in *application* – if she could describe and explain these phenomena, she should be better placed to recognise readiness for learning and change, and to facilitate more effectively the processes which enhance it.

The answers given to Blaikie's questions start to provide answers to those posed by Morgan, because they invite a transition from the role of researcher to the role of practitioner. This writer wanted to be able to conduct research in a way that would allow her to develop her craft or praxis, and to do it in a way that would be helpful to others as well as illuminating to herself. She wanted to work with people, not "on" them: in fact, she relied upon their conscious contribution to their own development as well as valuing and needing their conscious contribution to her own.
The research paradigm which seemed to meet these criteria – as well as being acceptable to her in ontological and epistemological terms – was that of action research.

The action research paradigm

As Dick (1992) has noted, and as the name suggests, action research is a methodology which has two aims: an action aim (to bring about change in some community or organisation or program or intervention) and a research aim (to increase knowledge and understanding on the part of the researcher or the client or both, or some other wider community). He notes, however, that the relative importance of the two aims can vary, with one or the other sometimes predominating.

Rapoport's (1970, p499) definition of action research is one of the most widely quoted on the subject:

> Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.

Others (for example, Susman & Evered, 1978) have added a third aim – namely, to develop the competency of people facing problems to help themselves and become self-sufficient in the future.

In action research, the practitioner is both researcher and agent actor (as a manager, consultant or other form of "change-agent").

Prideaux (1990) has identified five potential outcomes of action research:

- a change in the situation, practice or behaviour of the client;

- improved understanding of the client's situation or behaviour for the client and the researcher/change agent;

- development in the competence and practice of the researcher/change agent;

- additions to the store of knowledge and theory available to the wider professional and general community;

- improved understanding of the processes of organisational change.

Action research was first advocated in the English-speaking world by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1946 as a way of combining action – especially the achievement of social and organisational change – with the generation of knowledge and theory. McTaggart (1992) comments that though the invention of the term action research is often attributed to Lewin:

> ... recent historical work by Peter Gstettner and Herbert Altrichter then at the University of Klagenfurt shows that "action research" did not have its origins in the disciplines of social psychology but in community activism. The familiar plan, act, observe, reflect spiral attributed to Kurt Lewin (1946) was not the beginning of action research, even though his biographer claimed that Lewin was the inventor of the term (Marrow, 1969). Gstettner and Altrichter have discovered that J.L. Moreno, physician, social philosopher, poet and the inventor of the concepts of "sociometry", "psychodrama", "sociodrama" and "role play" had a much more "actionist" view of action research. Moreno was also the first to use the terms "inter-action research" and "action research" (McTaggart, 1992, p2).

Lewin's interest was founded in his very immediate concerns about Fascism, anti-semitism and inter-group conflict during the early 1940's. He was concerned that traditional positivistic research methods were not helping in the resolution of critical social problems. The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations based in Britain – an interdisciplinary group which drew on psychoanalysis and social psychiatry – was also committed to "the social engagement of social sciences" (Susman & Evered, 1978). The process of action research can be described as a cycle of planning, action and review of the action resulting in other continuing and iterative cycles of planning, action and review. (See Figure 1.)

Susman and Evered (1978), have offered a very systematic assessment of the scientific merits of action research. Judged against the criteria of positivist science, it is not capable of offering scientific explanation. Judged more broadly, it does have the capacity to generate knowledge for use in solving problems faced by individuals and organisations. To the question, which is better – positivist science or action research – their answer is: it all depends on what you want to study and under what conditions.

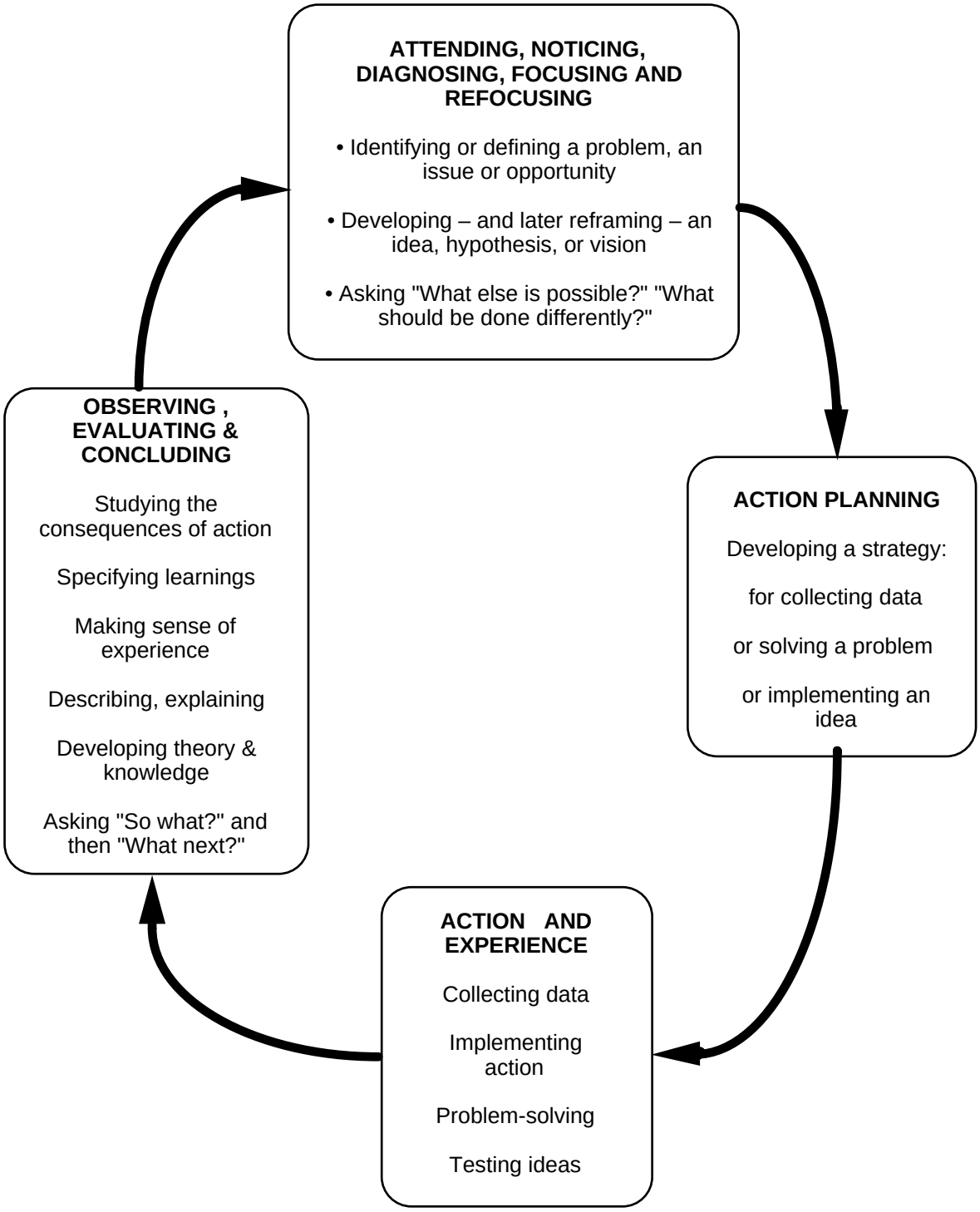


Figure 1: The action research cycle

They suggest that there are many potential reasons for using the action research paradigm. Against the background of ontological and epistemological issues raised in the previous section, it can be useful when:

- the "subject" is "self-reflective" ("conscious");
- the reason for undertaking the action research intervention is to solve a problem which the subject has not helped to define and which cannot be solved without their active involvement;
- the research question or purpose cannot be teased out without the co-operation of the "subject";
- broad or fuzzy research questions are to be developed and tackled in a very particular context;
- a wide range of factors are at play in the context of a dynamic relationship between actors in a complex "real-life" situation;
- the issue or situation concerned must be explored over a long period of time with the subject;
- current experience is the most effective way of creating possibilities and opportunities for change;
- the practitioner needs a methodology that combines rigour with responsiveness;
- the practitioner needs to continuously tap into and extend his or her own experience and knowledge in order to help effect change in the issue or problem being addressed.

Given the set of questions with which she became pre-occupied (see Chapter 1, p11) this writer was attracted to the action research paradigm for all of those reasons. And she was interested in all the outcomes identified by Prideaux (1990) and mentioned earlier. It is true that she was not engaged in effecting change in any one organisational or community setting, as is most often the case with action research. But she was certainly engaged in the business of creating change in co-operation with others.

Rapoport's definition of action research (cited earlier) emphasises that the action is carried out in collaboration between the action researcher and the client system. In practice, that collaboration might be focussed on all or only some phases of the action research cycle. For example, the client might be the one who undertakes all or most of the action, while the researcher participates in the diagnosis, planning, reflection and evaluation – or vice versa. There might be more or less involvement by one or other parties in any phase of the process, and this pattern of involvement might change as further cycles of the process take their course. But whatever the level and focus of involvement, action research has been developed around the premise that people are to be engaged with, not acted upon, that they are capable of managing themselves in their organisational roles rather than being made the objects of research.

Action research as a vehicle for learning

Action research was initially attractive to this researcher on pragmatic rather that ontological or epistemological grounds, because:

> action research has as its central feature the use of changes in practice as a way of inducing improvement in the practice itself, the situation in which it occurs, the rationale for the work, and in the understanding of all of these. Action research uses strategic action as a probe for improvement and understanding (Braun et al, 1988).

While there are many ways in which learning can take place during the course of action research (in fact, it can happen in all of the ways in which human beings learn) it lends itself very obviously to the application of *action learning* approaches, deriving from the work of Reg Revans (see, for example, Revans, 1980 and 1982).

Lessem (1982) has prepared a delightful "biography of action learning" in which he traces the development of Revan's work and thinking. He notes that the action learning concept was applied with "discipline and design" for the first time in British industry in the 1970's (Lessem, 1982, p12). Action learning is an approach to development which is based on learning from experience. In its "purest" form, an individual is invited to spend a number of months working on a new project or task, perhaps in a situation unfamiliar to that person. During that time, the individual becomes part of a learning-set or group of four or five other learners, employing a social process through which, to quote Lessem "by the apparent incongruity of their exchanges ... (the learners) ... frequently cause each other to examine afresh both "project" design and its implementation" (Lessem, 1982, p12).

Later developments of the concept do not necessarily presume the continued existence of a learning group, but still invite the learner to engage in systematic reflection on their experience, in a variety of ways (see, for example, the work of Marsick et al, on "action-reflection learning", 1992). Another – related – approach is the problem-oriented process suggested by Bowden (1986) which builds the context of a management development program on the real issues and problems facing the organisation and the managers in it. In the work of the educator Schon (1987), the use of systematic reflection as an effective way for practitioners to learn is brought to life in the context of dialogue between "learner" and "educator". The metaphor of "the master class" perhaps sums up best the context in which he explains reflection.

The key to experience-based learning is that the individual is asked to access direct

personal experience and practice in "real life" situations, as compared with reading about other people's experience and ideas, or simply thinking about ideas in a training situation. The role of the management educator is to facilitate ways in which people can create, access and reflect upon their experience. Kolb's (1984) learning cycle describes the processes involved for the learner – of collecting data through experience, trying to make sense of the data, perhaps developing an idea or conclusion which can be tested through further experience and the engaging in iterative cycles of reflecting, concluding and experiencing. It is the same concept which is captured in the action research cycle depicted earlier in Figure 1.

While there are many techniques which assist the process of action learning, it is perhaps helpful to mention two which are illustrative of what is available. One is the contract learning process (Knowles, 1984) which provides a framework for thinking about and documenting experiences which provide learning opportunities. The phases in a learning contract, as described by Prideaux and Ford (1988), include: diagnosing a learning need; specifying learning objectives; developing a learning plan; implementing the learning activities set out in the plan; and finally, evaluating the learning achieved and the benefits of the learning to that individual, to organisational stakeholders and to others with an interest in the achievements and learning of the individual.

Critical incident analysis is another technique designed to help individuals learn from and through experience. Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1986) are among those who have documented this tool, which requires the individual to document and reflect upon a specific incident or encounter which has occurred during the course of everyday experience, whether at work or elsewhere. The incident will usually be one which has created some discomfort, challenge, difficulty or surprise – something that has not worked out as expected, or the individual has been surprised, dismayed or unexpectedly pleased by the way something has been managed. The invitation is to

reflect systematically on the experience from a number of new points, by asking such questions as: "What exactly happened?", "What did I do?", "What did I say?", "What did others do or say?", "How did I feel about what was happening?", "Do I have any idea of how they felt?", "What was the impact of what I – and they – did?", "Did I do what I really wanted or needed to do?", "If not, do I know why not?", "What would I do differently *next* time?"

This technique is really the application of the action learning cycle to a particular event – like "replaying the tape" and watching it in slow motion, relying of course on one's memory of the events, but also, if appropriate, accessing the experience of others involved – as a means of testing the reality of one's own interpretations and recollections.

The close alignment in her work of action research and action learning was a continual source of creative tension for this writer, throughout the course of the study. As acknowledged earlier, she was in the position of using action research and action learning methods in the context of management development. This led, among other things, to the creation of a situation in which the development of her own praxis became the subject of the study, hand-in-hand with the development of a "theory". Some of the methodological implications of that situation are explored later in this chapter.

Before closing off this section, however, it is important to articulate a very fundamental concern that has been raised by – among others – McTaggart (1992). He believes that the original value of action research – as espoused by Lewin (1946) for example – are in danger of being corrupted when organisations use the term action research:

> as the rubric for activities such as action learning, for example in the work of "quality circles", themselves little more than a post-modern expression of

> Taylorism in the guise of the propagation of "world best practice" (Watkins, 1992). In these situations, workers, managers and investors are alike coopted into the value-system of the organisation and its fundamental purposes as a societal institution are not called into question. The ordinary expectation among action researchers is the antithesis of that: a fundamental purpose of action research is to make practices and the values they embody explicit and problematic...
>
> When we see modern technicist versions of action research and action learning which are oriented, for example, towards "quality control" or "staff development" with both being very narrowly understood, we understand how an emphasis on "learning" denies the fundamental liberatory aspirations of Moreno's work with prostitutes in Spittelburg, Vienna, at the turn of the century, Kurt Lewin's work with those disadvantaged by race and poverty in post-war United States, and Reg Revan's (1980, 1982) work in the mines of Sheffield in post-war England where the term "action learning" first gained currency. "Workplace *learning*" too often means applying routines invented by others, believing reasons invented by others, servicing aspirations invented by others, and giving expression to values advocated by others. In contrast, work place *knowledge production* means *participation* in the praxis of intervention and construction of new ways of working, in the justification of new ways of working and new working goals, and in the formulation of more complex and sophisticated ways of valuing work, work culture and its place in people's lifeworlds (McTaggart, 1992, pp4 and 6).

Kemmis (1992) and Zuber-Skerritt (1992) raise the same issue. Berger and Luckman (1966) describe the "social" construction of reality but these writers remind us just how completely that construction of reality is determined by the particular society in which one lives, noting that body of Russian and German thinking and literature which suggests that even the inner plane of consciousness is generated by society. For them, one of the values of action research is that it has the potential to liberate or emancipate individuals from socially conditioned mind-sets, values and possibly even states of consciousness. This is consistent with what Freire (1970, p27) describes as "conscientisation": "The process by which people, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-historical reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality."

Kemmis (1992, p60) suggests as an alternative to both positivist and interpretive research methodologies, a third "critical method" which is neither objective nor subjective but is both objective and subjective, "in the sense that one treats oneself and

one's fellows (and the social structures of which one is a part) both as subjects and objects in a process of *critical reflection and self-reflection*" (italics his).

The present writer believes that Kemmis' interpretation of the interpretivist position is too narrow, and that it does, in fact, admit the concept of self-reflection. It will be argued later in this thesis that Ducker's (1969) "age of discontinuity" implies a capacity for learning which is critically reflective and self-reflective in precisely the way that these writers advocate.

This line of thinking is developed in Chapter 3, although later in the current chapter there is preliminary exploration of the kind of reflection that is required to surface fundamental values and mindsets.

Action research and the generation of useful knowledge

As a research paradigm action research also had appeal to this researcher because it allowed investigation to commence exactly like a fishing trip – with a hunch that the waters were worth fishing; not much hope, at least initially, of establishing a high order of explanation, but an eagerness to hear what people had to say, to explore her own implicit ideas as well as theirs, and to work with them in the creation of greater insight – description, if not explanation – into what helps and what doesn't help on the voyage of learning to be a better manager.

It has been mentioned earlier that as the study continued, the researcher did find herself grappling with something that seemed like "theory-building", albeit a personal theory intended to enrich her practice. She wanted to know why the reflective process she was interested in worked, and she needed to combine her own thinking and experience with the thinking and experience of others in order to do so.

So it is important to comment on the capacity of action research to generate useful knowledge within the interpretivist framework. There are at least two important issues to be considered here: one is the capacity of the paradigm to generate an understanding or knowledge of a situation which is helpful in enabling the researcher and other players to take effective action; the other is the capacity of the paradigm to generate understanding or knowledge which is useful to others, in different situations. By "understanding or knowledge" what is meant here is both the capacity to describe what is happening and the capacity to explain it (by constructing a theory about why it is happening). Both involve the construction of meaning or "sense-making".

It needs to be acknowledged that the findings or conclusions drawn from action research are not necessarily easy to generate and apply to other situations – that it produces "local knowledge". When one examines the history of psychological research, one could equally argue that in its efforts to maintain scientific rigour from the positivist perspective, it has produced research results that are so narrowly focussed and fragmented as to be of little practical value (Westland, 1978).

Nonetheless, the issue is an important one. For the researcher, the issue is: "Will I be able to make this technique work again with a different person? in a different situation?" For the other players in the situation, the issue is: "Will we able to do this again, by ourselves?" For "outsiders", the issue is: "Will it work for us? in a different organisation, industry, culture, etc?"

For the practitioner engaged in action research, the importance of understanding and impacting on a particular or local situation can be so great that the consideration of producing more broadly applicable knowledge is almost a luxury. For the researcher, however, the need to do both creates a potential tension between the need for me or us to understand it and "get it right this time" and the need to prove that how I/we got it right is replicable by others.

There are at least two ways in which researchers are encouraged to handle this tension (see, for example, Dick, 1992): one is by the use of cyclical or iterative processes which encourage the researcher to continually test his/her ideas in action, and the second is the use of what Dick (1992) calls the dialectic – working with multiple information sources that are preferably independent of one another and ensuring that other people engage with and check the researcher's thinking and action.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) place a strong emphasis on the former in their book *Participating in Action Research Methodology*. This is a methodology which Kemmis and McTaggart have applied extensively in their teaching at Deakin University, in Victoria.

The essence of their approach is to use a defined cycle of research consisting of four steps: plan, act, observe and reflect. The cycle is carried out by the participants or clients of the intervention, it is not something done to the clients by the researcher. It is called an "emancipating" approach because it is said to "liberate" those who are researched from the prevailing value-sets of the contexts in which they work. The researcher works "arm-in-arm" with the client (Prideaux, 1990), in a collaborative relationship.

The "dialectic" is really a variation on what is known as "triangulation" (Jick, 1979). The idea is to use similarities and differences in the data from different sources to increase the rigour of the progress; for example, by using:

- different informants or participants or different samples of informants or participants;
- different research settings;

- the same informant or participant responding to different questions which address the same topic from different perspectives;
- information collected at different times;
- different researchers;
- or, as in triangulation, different methods.

In these ways, it is hoped, both the internal validity of the process (the rigour of the conclusions reached) and its generalisability can be maximised. Dialectical methodologies are not just about replication, but about rigorously and deliberately checking the logic processes used and the application of convergent techniques which reduce the reliance of the process on any one individual.

It is perhaps useful at this point to comment on the logic and processes which are involved in action research. It has the potential to combine the inductive, deductive and abductive logic processes described earlier, although – as already acknowledged – it is not capable of meeting the criteria of positivist science.

The deductive approach is a "top-down" one which assumes that we have a theory, an idea, a vision, a proposition or hypothesis which we test against what is actually observed. Apart from being the logical thing to do when we have an idea that we want to try out, this approach has the advantage of giving us some focus for the investigation and usually putting some limits around what's relevant and what isn't. As an approach, it allows us to test both descriptions and explanations against some form of experience.

The inductive – or "bottom-up" – approach invites us to start out with a set of observations and then find constructs or theories which will describe or explain the

phenomena so observed. It is the equivalent of going on a fishing trip when all we have is a "tip-off" that some waters may be more fertile than others. It has the advantage that it may limit the temptation to make premature and unwarranted assumptions about what is being dealt with. It encourages us to go looking for the right questions, instead of the right answers, and increases the likelihood that we will be "surprised" by what we experience, since we deliberately try to limit the extent to which we impose limits on our potential experience.

It has the decided disadvantage of being "messy", unfocussed, potentially time-consuming and expensive, relative to a "top-down" approach. Potentially, everything is relevant data and "grist to the mill".

In real life, it can be argued that social research is generally a combination of these two approaches – leaving aside the rigidly hypothetico-deductive methodology beloved of experimental psychology.

As a paradigm that falls within the interpretivist framework, it is hardly surprising that the abductive logic or dialogic approach can also be easily incorporated in action research. The iterative nature of that logic process is particularly apt.

Because action research is an iterative, cyclical process, it provides focus but has the potential to keep presenting us with richer and more extensive data, with all the attendant possibilities of surprise. The researcher can literally go on engaging with the data – in the form of conversations, dialogue, listening, observing, reading – for as long as needed, until there are no more useful possibilities or meanings to be created. Experience is continually recycled; earlier experiences and data are re-visited with the wisdom of accumulated learning; further and new experience is planned in the light of what went on before, but whatever happens on the journey, both planned and unplanned, will be systematically reviewed and evaluated.

Checkland's (1981) *Soft Systems Methodology* is an example of abduction – using dialectics to generate the "ideal types" mentioned earlier in this chapter (Schutz, 1967).

Baburoglu and Raun (1992) take the logic process one step further, by adding what they call the "constructivist epistemological argument" – the contention that action research can be based on, and devoted to the construction of, images of desirable futures, so-called "future theories" and not focussed on the solution of current or pre-existing problems and issues. "Future theories" identify ends and means for both individual and organisational development. They see these as being generated jointly by the stakeholders of a system and the involved action researcher, and tested every time that the prescriptions for action contained in them are followed by stakeholders within a system.

The management of individuality and subjectivity in action research

Whatever logic process is used, action researchers are often encouraged to employ techniques which encourage convergent thinking among participants (whether researcher, client or participant), as a way of injecting internal validity into the process. By itself this does not guarantee that the result or findings produced by that process are necessarily applicable anywhere else, but it helps to ensure that they were at least valid in the context in which – and for which – they were originally generated.

To help someone outside the research situation form any conclusion about how helpful precisely the research findings might be to them, it is very important to indicate what this context was – to be clear not only about exactly how the research was conducted, but also where it was conducted and by whom. This puts the work in context, in time and place and culture. This writer, as an academic supervisor, insists on quite explicit detail from action research students, in this respect, and has come to regard the

capacity to accurately identify and describe the context of research as a research skill in its own right. Noticing what is important to mention to others about the context requires discernment about what is different or particularly characteristic of any given situation. It is a way of managing the potentially highly individualistic nature of research findings by acknowledging it, rather than hiding it.

Zuber-Skerritt (1991) has edited and contributed to a collection of papers which includes contributions by a number of Australian researchers and academics. This book effectively integrates and critiques recent thinking and practice in the application of action research in higher education settings, although the issues and conclusions drawn out are relevant in many other settings. It contains some very sophisticated thinking about the epistemological and ontological significance of action research (see, for example, Altrichter's (1992, pp82-84) treatment of the question of validation).

Leaving that book aside, however, in reviewing the action research literature, this writer became increasingly concerned about the way in which subjectivity and the individual's own search for meaning and understanding are sometimes treated. Dick (1972), by way of illustrating dialectic processes in action, describes convergent interviewing which uses paired interviews to create a dialectic. "So for example, if two interviewees disagree about x, whatever x is, look for exceptions in later interviews. If the interviewees disagree about x, try in later interviews to explain the disagreement. If only one person mentions x, ignore it" (Dick, 1992, p14). This was a comment which surprised this writer, since it suggested that the reaction of one individual is to be ignored, if it doesn't fit with the views of others.

Although Dick's comment reflects the thinking of a particular individual, the comment – and others like it – are potentially influential ones because they appear in a document specifically prepared to give Australian post-graduate students advice about conducting action research. Similarly, it is interesting to read a document prepared by

the Fielding Institute in California – an educational organisation which espouses the value of non-positivist research paradigms and in many ways acknowledges the highly personal character of action research (see its Study Guide, Fielding Institute, 1991). Their Study Guide for post-graduate students gives what the writer regards as a very clear account of the interpretivist phenomenological perspective (Husserl, 1954) and some examples of paradigms which would be acceptable within that perspective, and says that phenomenological methods are appropriate when there is no established understanding of a phenomenon, nothing sufficiently closely related from which to make valid inferences, or distrust of the prevailing description or explanation of some behaviour of interest. It cites, for example, a PhD dissertation which investigates the experiences of a woman preparing to take over the business of her father. The same document, in the same paragraph, asserts that phenomenological methods are not appropriate when one is trying to "predict and control" (Husserl, 1954, p40). The message, clearly given in this and other parts of the document, is that individual knowledge and understanding count for little when there is "real" scientific work to be done. Judged in this way, the understanding generated by Einstein's "kinaesthetic thinking" process (Koestler, 1964, p171) – namely that $E=mc^2$ – would have to be dismissed as being of little value in controlling or predicting natural phenomena.

Whilst acknowledging the need to balance individual knowledge and understanding with the generation of collective wisdom, this writer would agree with Georgi (1993) that almost without knowing it, people coming from an anti-positivist interpretivist perspective can put themselves back into a positivist view of the world, in which personal, particular and local understanding and wisdom is potentially both under-valued and even actively discouraged in the research context.

It might be that, at heart, we are all realists. By contrast, the *solipsistic* perspective – an extreme nominativist view of the world which has each of us trapped in individual realities of our own making with no way of ever knowing whether it is shared by

anyone else (see Hughes, 1980) is a very challenging one for human beings, let alone researchers, to accept. We reach out, in many different ways, for reassurance that there are other human beings out there, that there are things which have solid shape and real existence, that exist independently of us. We also, at times, reach out for "truth" and knowledge in various forms, for the comfort that comes from shared understanding. The existential anxiety associated with any other conception of the universe is perhaps too awful for us to contemplate. Arguably even the interpretivist, seeking explanation within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity, within the frame of reference of the participant as opposed to the observer of action, may have trouble with that proposition, and underneath it all, take shelter in a realist view of the world.

Reanney (1993) makes the point well:

> I want to stress how axiomatic this assumption is and how deeply it colours our thinking; the idea that a human mind can experiment with Nature in a such a way that the experimenter does not influence the outcome of the experiment lies at the core of the scientific method; it is the basis for the doctrine of "objectivity". This doctrine has paramount status in our culture, not just in physics but in the so-called "social sciences" that look to "hard" science for their validation.
>
> This assumption is pervasive, powerful, accepted, compelling – and *wrong*.
>
> The insight that has restructured our vision comes from a branch of physics called *quantum mechanics*. Stripped of its complexities, the insight is simply this, that the act of observation changes the nature of the thing observed, that the observer and the observed, far from being separate, are coupled in the most intimate of ways.
>
> Physicist John Wheeler summed up this radical refocussing in these words:
>
> Nothing is more important about the quantum principle than this, that it destroys the concept of the world as "sitting out there", with the observer safely separated from it by a 20cm slab of plate glass. Even to observe so minuscule an object as an electron he must shatter the glass. He must reach in... Moreover the measurement changes the state of the electron. The universe will never afterwards be the same. To describe what has happened one has to cross out that old word "observer" and put in its place the new word "participator".
>
> Precisely because it comes from the direction they least expect it, namely

> science itself, the quantum message is very threatening to people who still live within the subject/object duality, so let me try and explain it in my own language.
>
> By its own terms of reference, science attempted to set itself apart from the mental processes that made its successes possible. But this separation was never achievable, even in principle. Facts, items of awareness, only gain meaning if they are brought together into statements or theories. Yet the very act of integration that produces a theory draws on an invisible software of shared presuppositions and unconsciously accepted value judgements and this subliminal software creates the mindset we inhabit. This mindset, this neural programming, was written by natural selection and by our own past experience. It is thus not, in any sense, "absolute", it can and must and does reflect "where we come from".
>
> This is the often-said but seldom understood message of quantum physics – simple and shattering – that the data has no meaning apart from the software that organises it, that there is no such thing as an "uninterpreted fact".

The quantum revolution impacts on our whole concept of reality. because of the way we are made, biologically, we see things as external to us – "before our eyes", in our field of vision, "out there" – on a sheet of paper or at the end of a microscope. Yet the real act of seeing that allows us to make sense of the world goes on *behind* our eyes. It is the mental program that integrates the data we receive, not the receiving organ (eye) which permits us to see. We see with our software. Which means that *our reality can only be as good as the software we bring to it* (Reanney, 1993, pp2-3).

Among interpretivists, despite the acknowledgment of social reality as being a "constructed" reality which is different from the natural world, there may perhaps still be the underlying belief that "out there somewhere" there is such a thing as a "pure" data – even accepting that pure psycho-social data is made up of the subjective thoughts, feelings and actions of other human beings. This thinking is nicely illustrated in the work of the writer's graduate student, quoted earlier (Percy, 1993):

> Raw data is data in its "purest" form, uncontaminated by the individual researcher's psychological filtering process. The filtering process has two sieves: both are connected to our mental models, or how we make sense of the world... One sieve selectively sifts through the available data, so that data which has some significance for us, stands out – what we choose to pay attention to and, conversely what data we block, ignore or miss by selecting it out of

> awareness. The other sieve acts as a translator, interpreting data into our internal language system so that it has meaning. This latter sieve may effectively and unintentionally embellish and change the raw data (Percy, 1993, p66).

This quotation was interesting for this writer because the student in question would describe herself as an interpretivist (Percy, 1993) and yet does not seem to acknowledge that in an interpretivist world view, there is no such thing as "uncontaminated" psycho-social data.

This is not intended to be an argument for removing all efforts at rigour in interpretivist research, but it is contended by this writer that efforts to eliminate or ignore the efforts of individuals to construct meaning – or subjectivity, as it is more often called – in interpretivist research are misdirected. It is, in her view, one thing to challenge, refine and enrich the researcher's thinking through cyclical activity, triangulation and dialogue with others; it is quite another to imply that individual thinking either has no place in the process or in some way contaminates it. Her contention is that by acknowledging individuality, by respecting it and seeking to understand it, and by placing it carefully in context, we not only help individuals to create meaning for themselves, but to add in important ways to our collective knowledge and understanding.

The *hermeneutic* stream of interpretivist thinking (Reason & Hawkins, 1988) does seem prepared to confront the methodological implications of a socially constructed universe, if not an individually constructed one. Defined as "the science of interpretation", it suggests that no amount of analytic-empirical data can totally establish meaning, since meaning is not established by sensory data but by unrestrained communicative inquiry and interpretation.

By comparison with the positivistic perspective, in the hermeneutic approach the

researcher's attention is not focussed solely around theories and observed problems, but is allowed to float more widely; "tacit" knowledge (the kind of understanding that cannot be articulated in words or is not entirely conscious) is given an important role; researchers accept influence from both science and personal experience, and can use their personality and values as instruments; researchers allow both feelings and reason to govern their actions; and researchers partially – and sometimes wholly – create what they study, for example, the meaning of a process or document (Reason, 1988).

Reason and Hawkins (1988), as major advocates of the hermeneutic perspective, are keen to point out that they are not suggesting a return to the confusion and potential error of naive inquiry. Nor do they seek the "yoga of objectivity": the development (over 10-15 years) of a state of mind which is totally detached, objective, analytical, clinical and pure, which in their view creates "essentially dead knowledge, alienated from its source" (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p12).

They are in pursuit of what they describe as an emerging new paradigm, which goes beyond the split between objective and subjective data, and achieves what they refer to as "critical subjectivity", a state in which we see the world as *our* world, rather than *the* world (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p12).

Although hermeneutic tools of inquiry are still regarded with suspicion even by many who think of themselves as interpretivists (Dick, 1992, for example, described them as "counter cultural"), they do challenge us to think about the role and experience of the researcher in the process, instead of focussing simply on the paradigm, methodologies and techniques he or she uses. There are several aspects to this role and experience that will be pursued here: the potential of the research process to *change the researcher*; the extent to which the researcher is *part of the product* – as well as the process – of research; and the extent to which the researcher becomes *the subject of the research*.

The potential of the research process to change the researcher

The capacity of action research to change the researcher has already been acknowledged in this chapter. Changes in the researcher's praxis and other kinds of learning are expected and encouraged. Nor is it simply a shift in the knowledge of the researcher that might be involved. The researcher might be required to adjust the very concepts, mental models and implicit theories which he/she used to generate the data in the first place.

As Morgan (1983, p373) has noted: "When we engage in action research, thought and interpretation, we are not simply involved in instrumental processes of acquiring knowledge, but in processes through which we actually make and re-make ourselves as human beings." The action researcher is not like a catalyst which remains unaltered by the chemical reaction which it influences.

Revans apparently did not believe that acknowledgment of the researcher as learner compromised the scientific value of the process. In fact, he has gone so far as to identify action learning with the scientific method:

> Action learning is also a personal activity which combines objective analysis ("science") and subjective commitment ("religion"). Its logical foundation is the structural identity of the scientific method, of rational decision making, of the exchange of sound advice and fair criticism, and of the learning of new behaviour. Yet, while talking and argument call only for intelligence or quickness of wit, doing and action call for commitment or true belief. For, in taking action, Revans claims, especially after one has clearly exposed one's motives to close and critical colleagues, one is obliged to explore that inner self otherwise so often taken for granted. In seeking answers to difficult work-related questions, especially in conditions of risk and confusion, miners, nurses and managers begin to learn who they themselves may be: to answer their "work-questions" they must, at the same time, explore their "self-questions". The fundamental law of industrial behaviour, that Revans was seeking in the 1950s, may well have been discovered by him in the 1970s:
>
> knowledge is the consequence of action, and to know is the same as to do

(Revans, 1982)

or, to elaborate (Revans, 1981):

> the underlying structures of successful achievement, of learning, of intelligent counselling, and of what we call the scientific method, are logically identical (Lessem, 1982, pp12-13).

Having identified action learning with the scientific method, Revans (1982, p723) sets out a process of learning and scientific inquiry called the "System Beta" which is a combination of the inductive and deductive logic processes described earlier. The point is that he accepted the essentially human character of the process, and the involvement of the researcher or learner.

Here is Lessem (1982) again, making a similar point:

> Action learning, at its simplest, is an approach to management education. At its most profound it is a form of personal therapy, a means of social and economic transformation, and even a way of life. Let me try to reconstruct Revan's argument, step by step.
>
> We start with the symbolic amalgamation of "artisan" and "scribe". Knowledge, for Revans, can be only the outcome of action. By wrestling (as artisan) with live problems, and subsequently reflecting (as scribe) upon the results of his achievements, the learner acquires knowledge. Revans continues with the symbolic intermingling of "education" and "industry". For the knowledge acquired is not so much the facts or techniques imparted by an educator, but, more appropriately, the reinterpretation of the practitioner's own existing knowledge (Lessem, 1982, p12).

Because reflection leads back into action of one kind of another, and action is followed by reflection of one kind or another, the possibility that applied learning (defined by this writer as *a sustained change in behaviour*) will take place is greatly increased.

This can happen for several reasons. For example, systematically thinking about the experience can trigger new or deeper understanding of what is or was happening and, equipped with this insight, we can slightly modify our behaviour next time, or actively experiment with something quite different. Or the act of diagnosing and focussing can

bring an issue into different perspective and lead to a re-framing of what we think we are trying to do and actually need to do. When this reframing leads to a significant shift in the way we view the world and in the way we act in the world, Argyris (1982) would say that we are engaged in double-loop learning.

This is the kind of learning in which we "shift gears" in the way we behave. To use the writer's own metaphor, we shift from first, through second, to third position. In the first position, we simply do what comes naturally, through habit, instinct or skills. We don't stop and think about it, we just do it. In second position, we do stop and think about it – usually because someone or something has challenged our first position behaviour in some way. Perhaps we didn't get the response we expected, or perhaps we were facing something new or unfamiliar or difficult that caused us to stop and review our action. In third position, we stop and not only think, but think about the way we are thinking – we start questioning why we are doing what we are doing. For example, we might check the assumptions we've been making or the way we've been feeling or the motives behind our actions. When we act from third position we are engaging in double-loop learning. Senge (199) would say that we are reviewing our "mental models", Argyris and Schon (1978) that we are accessing our "implicit theories". Both these phrases imply a reliance on thinking but this writer's use of the term third position extends to emotional and intuitive processes and experience.

Not all the learning that happens during the process will be double-loop learning from third position. Much of it will be the result of day-to-day incremental change which we barely notice or acknowledge. We go on operating from our first or second position; nonetheless, over time, differences in what we do might still happen because, without noticing, people or events in the world outside are shaping our responses. This is the process that psychologists call "conditioning" (Thorndike, 1932).

Whether it is happening at the levels of first, second or third position, the processes

involve a continuous – and often complex and subtle – interplay between internal data (the inner world of experience, including ideas, thoughts, feelings, fantasies, dreams and imaginings) and the external data, delivered to us through our senses, which gives us information about what is happening in the world beyond ourselves. There is a constant inter-mingling of the two sets of data, each partly creating, certainly modifying and often filtering the other.

The present writer identifies this process with the "first-person" or "critical" research method described by Kemmis (1992) and referred to earlier in this chapter.

The researcher as part of the product – as well as of the process – of research

Heidegger (1962) and others view research as a specific form of *human* action because human minds are the research instruments through which all data is initially generated and ultimately interpreted. From that perspective the concepts, filters, blind spots, assumptions, values, stereotypes, projections and implicit theories which are in the mind of the investigator must inevitably be part of the product in any attempts at description and explanation. Again, the work of Berger and Luckman (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality* is a powerful statement of how inescapably the description – let alone the explanation – is the product of the researcher.

It is not simply that the research bears the stamp of the researcher; rather, the research process and its product can be regarded as the result of *individual creative* human action, in much the same way that we speak of Van Gogh's painting as being "a Van Gogh". What is being created are not paintings, but meaning (Smith, 1992). Like paintings, however, those meanings can be held up for examination by others, and with the intention of sharing them.

From the hermeneutic interpretivist perspective, even the acts of noticing, and

selecting, data (though not all data selection is consciously reflected upon) can be seen as essentially *individual* and *creative* ones. As a result, it becomes an important research activity for the researcher to ask: "Why did I attend to that particular event or idea?", "Why did I notice it?", What makes it "count" for me as data?", "What meaning do I attach to it?", "What significance did it have for me that made me "notice" it even before I understood it?"

This also helps to explain the difficulty experienced by this writer, at least, in differentiating between the act (and the techniques) of data collection and the act (and the techniques) used for data analysis. In a functionalist research paradigm, one can generally make this distinction quite easily – one interviews people, or conducts a controlled social experiment, or administers a questionnaire, and then one applies to that data techniques of classification, interpretation and analysis (such as coding and statistical analysis).

The interpretive perspective at least directly acknowledges that in the moment of asking a question and listening to the answer, the researcher has created, collected and already commenced the process of interpreting the data, and may even be in the process of developing a theory about it.

As well as blurring the boundaries of the process of data generation, the hermeneutic view also potentially complicates our conception of what constitutes "data". Thus Jones (1985) speaks of "talk" (meaning "casual" conversations as well as "planned" interviews) and Cunningham (1988) of "contextual locating" (meaning attending and speaking at conferences, the discussions academics have at staff meetings, and the kind of experience that comes from simply "hanging around" a particular group of people over a period of time).

These are seen not just as locations in which data are collected, but as ways in which

data are created. In the hermeneutic view, there is no aspect of the researcher's experience which is not potentially "grist for the mill".

Which leads to the interesting question of what is happening when the data is extended to include the researcher's experience of reflecting on him or herself.

The researcher as the subject of research

In processes of action learning, it is easy to see the processes of double-loop learning, third position thinking and critical incident analysis; the subject of reflection is the behaviour of the learner – including actions taken in the external world that others can see and evaluate, and feelings and thoughts that are experienced directly "on the inside" only by the learner, but which can be described to others.

In action research, the researcher is also encouraged to reflect on their own behaviour, both external and internal behaviour. External behaviour is evaluated in terms of its impact and effectiveness on others. Internal behaviour is also examined, using the sort of dialectic approaches described earlier (Dick, 1993) and the sort of analysis of logic (whether inductive, deductive or abductive) which Revans prescribed in System Beta (Revans, 1982).

However, as this writer has already mentioned, she has the uneasy feeling that the attention given to the researcher's behaviour in action research is often driven by a perceived need to control and contain it.

She would certainly assert that even for many of whose who write about action research and practise it – let alone the positivists of the world – it would be difficult to concede that there are times – and possibly a great many times – when the researcher is, for all practical purposes, the subject of their own research.

This goes beyond allowing that the researcher's experience, feelings, thoughts and behaviour are relevant and admissible data. It goes beyond acknowledging that the researcher both selects and creates the data which are studied. It requires us to acknowledge that the researcher is engaged in self-examination and that this is a legitimate part of the research process. In interpretivist terms, this is about constructing and/or developing understanding of oneself, about developing *meaning* in relation to oneself.

This kind of thinking led this writer, eventually, to such hermeneutic research techniques as story-telling (Reason & Hawkins, 1988), narrative (Yin, 1987) and biography (Ferrarotti, 1981).

Although there are some famous procedures for the "researcher-as-subject-of-own-research" – Freud's analysis of his own dreams is a case in point (see Jones', 1961, biography of Freud) – it was this writer's experience that when she told academic colleagues that, increasingly she found she was researching the development of her own praxis and theory, most shuddered and asked, "How are you going to get away with *that*?"

Instead of shuddering, Morgan (1983) has suggested that what is needed are research strategies that acknowledge and allow us to deal constructively with the relativism that flows from the notion of researcher-as-learner, researcher-as-creator, researcher-as-end-product, and researcher-as-subject-of-own-research.

> Or to put the matter in a more positive way, we need to find a way of dealing with the *possibilities* that relativism signifies. In order to find such an approach, it is necessary to reframe our view of knowledge in a way that gets beyond the idea that knowledge is in some sense foundational and can be evaluated in an absolute way, for it is this idea that ultimately leads us to try and banish the uncertainty associated with relativism, rather than simply to deal with it as an inevitable process through which knowledge is gathered (Morgan, 1983, pp372-373).

There are a number of writers who have discussed the subject of researcher-as-the-subject-of-research, including those represented in Zuber-Skerritt's book which was not published until 1992. Up until that time, this researcher had a sense of being pretty much "self-directed" in her search for ideas on the subject. To describe this book as being a comfort to this writer is a considerable understatement, The notion that the researcher quite explicitly needs to be the subject of research is explored by a number of contributors (as in Kemmis' description of critical research and critical learning alluded to earlier). The work of McTaggart (1992, p15) was also very helpful in this way, including his comment that, "We know too little about how people make use of their own experience and the experience of others to inform their work, and still less about how tacit knowledge and the subconscious interact with interpretation of experience in real work situations."

A writer who *did* help at an earlier stage in this writer's thinking was Cunningham (1988), whose interest is in researching self-managed learning. His work provided considerable inspiration for this writer, given the similarity of his research interests with her own. Cunningham has coined the term "wholistic interactive research" to cover five interconnecting methodologies: collaborative research, dialogic research, experiential research, action research and contextual locating.

Collaborative research involves a group of people who together pursue an investigation of a topic. The initiating researcher does not dictate the process of the research activity. He distinguishes two types of collaborative research: Type I (consonant with co-operative inquiry) where researchers study their own experience in the group of which they are all a part. Type II is where people come together to study experience that has occurred *outside* the group.

Dialogic research centres around two-person interaction and uses the dialogue as a

mode of "finding out". It is a special case of collaborative research, but Cunningham observes that there is something about the two-person mode that makes it distinctively different, since there is no group process to attend to, only the interpersonal relationship of two people.

Experiential research uses as its focus the direct experience of the person/researcher. He argues that experiential research in an essential feature of human science activity, and that researchers as persons should learn to be effective researchers of their own experience. His view is that personal experiential research "is not old-fashioned introspectionism, as it is based on experience and not on armchair theorising or limited projections" (Cunningham, 1988, p165). To be useful, however, in his view it needs to be linked to other methods: as well as talking with others (dialogic or collaborative research) one needs to test one's personal research in action.

Action research he identifies with the work of Lewin (1946) while *contextual locating* refers to the process by which one:

> feeds into and off the context within which one operates; so in this research there are people working in the field, writing about it, discussing it at conferences, etc. The theory developed in and through the other four methods will in part come out of this wider context and also feed into it. Hence there is an iterative, to-and-fro process which provides the basis for testing and evolving theory (Cunningham, 1988, p166).

Cunningham's map of contextual locating is reproduced in Figure 2.

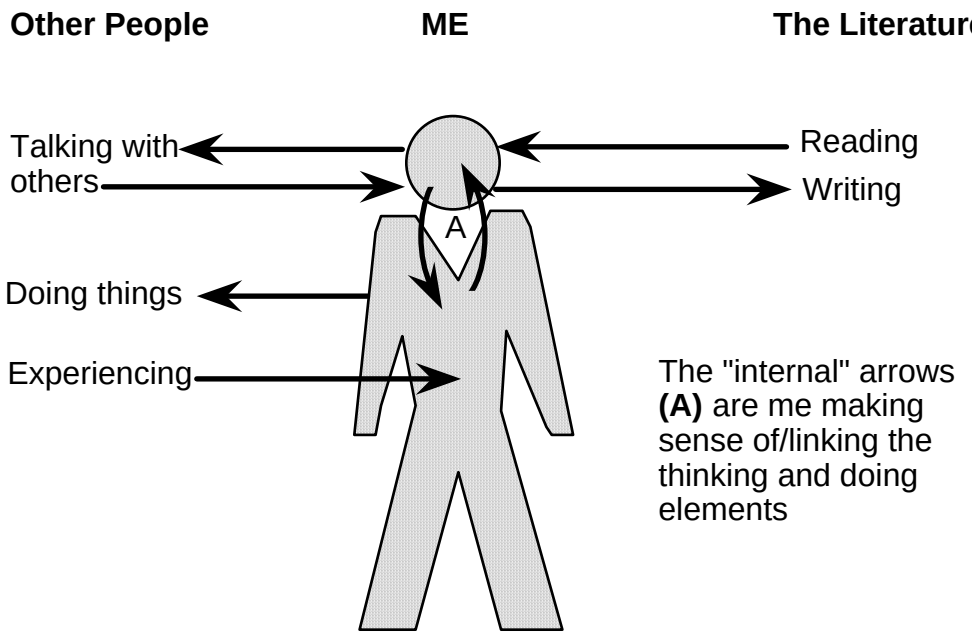


Figure 2: Contextual locating (Cunningham, 1988, p168)

While these ideas are useful in suggesting that nothing a researcher does is "inadmissible data", they do not, of themselves, solve what Heron calls "a critical paradox" of (action) research: "that I am seeking to validate research propositions by undergoing experiences that are picked out, defined and identified in terms of those same propositions" (Heron, 1988, p59) and suggests the need for "bracketing": "a competence that prevents such validation from merely being self-fulfilling and circular... it means that we can, as it were, hold these constructs in mental suspension, and allow the phenomena to speak somewhat for themselves" (Heron, 1988, p59).

Zuber-Skerritt (1992) alludes to "critical attitude" while Reason (1988) has used the terms "critical knowing" and "critical subjectivity" to describe the quality that research strategies need to have. "Critical subjectivity is a quality of awareness in which we do not suppress our primary subjective experience, nor do we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed and swept along by it; rather we raise it to consciousness and use it as part of the inquiry process" (Reason, 1988, p12).

This writer has come to understand "critical subjectivity and knowing" as involving the researcher in a delicate balance between fully knowing the individuality of the

meaning or sense one makes of one's own and other's data (including experience), and being able to stand aside from that individuality and put it in some larger or different perspective, which places a different meaning on the data. This is a paradoxical skill involving full recognition and ownership of "self" and distancing from self in order to develop meaning. It is an important skill for the learner intent on understanding and changing self (as later chapters will assess). For the researcher, it means being able to discriminate precisely between what is generated by oneself and is of value and meaning to oneself, and what is of value and creates meaning or knowledge for others.

This is not easy to do. As Heron (1988) has observed, to

> take an idea down into experience, whether to notice what it distorts or what it omits, is a tricky business... Making the experiential test (of a conclusion or idea born out of reflection on experience) involves them (the researcher) in a change of being. They become different: the idea is no longer just grasped by them intellectually – they have lived through it, they know it connaturally, as the philosophers say. They have worn it as the garment of their doing... " (Heron, 1988, p50)

"Critical subjectivity" represents a very high order of the "third position thinking", and "double-loop learning" and critical incident analysis processes described earlier. Engagement with the research task and with the people involved means engagement with oneself, with one's own theories, assumptions, values, confusions, generalisations, filters, strengths and weaknesses.

At the very least, "critical subjectivity" requires that we become aware of what we are doing – that we catch ourselves in the act – and consider carefully the stamp that we wish to leave and the behaviour we wish to enact. In the collaborative work implied by the action research paradigm, we are encouraged to take our clients, participants and other collaborators into the same state of "critical knowing" – an extraordinary feat of double-loop learning if one is capable of it.

For example, in developing a construct or theory, "the inquirers need to believe in an idea enough to get experientially involved in it, and at the same time they need to be unattached to it, watchful for shortcomings, noticing more than belief in it entails, and holding alternative ideas available in the mind at the ready" (Heron, 1988, pp 50–51).

This researcher certainly experienced, at first hand, the sustained creative tension which arises from somehow standing aside from oneself, watching and listening to oneself both in action and in the process of theory development. The next section describes some of the reflective techniques that helped her – or have helped others – to create some of the quality of critical subjectivity and critical knowing.

The preparation of this entire chapter is regarded by the writer as one of the most significant activities and products of the study. She approached it not simply as an exercise in designing methodology or in literature review, but as a substantial part of the development of her professional praxis. Her *understanding* of social research was enhanced enormously by engaging with the issues described so far. Her *practice* – both as a researcher, learner and facilitator of others' learning – was considerably extended by thinking about and applying the reflective techniques described in the next section.

Reflective techniques as tools in research activity

This writer uses the term "reflective techniques" to encompass a number of processes – including data recognition and selection, data generation, data capture and interpretation. In the terms that were used earlier, she sees reflection as a creative action on the part of the researcher that cannot be neatly categorised as "data collection" or "data analysis", since it incorporates elements of both. In fact, the nearest this researcher could get to making that distinction was to identify particular situations in which data were to be generated (such as "supervision" sessions with

students or in interviews with managers) and to nominate those as "sources of data" – although in practice, she thought of them as being "learning opportunities" as much as "research situations".

This section begins with an attempt to describe what the process of reflection is, continues with an account of the reflective techniques which this researcher brought to the research process from her experience of action learning, and continues with a review of some of the reflective techniques offered in the research literature – generally from writers with an hermeneutic perspective.

At the outset, this writer brought to the research process a reasonably well-developed knowledge of – and experience in – applying the functionalist research paradigm. As the study proceeded, she developed the repertoire of reflective techniques she used in facilitating her own learning and the learning of others. As still more time passed, she learned more about other research paradigms and came to regard these action learning techniques as useful and appropriate techniques given her subject matter. She also learned about techniques for reflection that had been developed by hermeneutic interpretivists, in an effort to introduce that quality of "critical subjectivity" described already.

From a research perspective, the intention in using these techniques is not to "take the person out of the equation" or even to simply acknowledge and understand what the person is doing so that we can "factor the person out"; but rather to find a way to enhance the quality and richness of our knowledge generation process by allowing it be a fully human and creative act, while at the same time identifying and taking responsibility for our own idiosyncratic contribution. Since one of the purposes of research is to develop our collective understanding and wisdom – unlike therapy or management development which are aimed at enhancing individual understanding and competence – it is important that we put our contribution – our creative act – into

context so that others can make judgements about whether the meaning we have created is applicable and useful to them in creating their own meaning.

These words are the writer's own, but they have been embellished by the use of italics to clearly communicate the writer's understanding of the concepts being discussed.

A description of reflection:

Barry Smith in his book *Management Development in Australia* (1992) offers both a definition of reflection and a description of how reflection contributes to the development of meaning. There is a large body of literature in the field of education, philosophy and psychology dealing with how meaning and knowledge are constructed by human minds, much of it very sophisticated (see for example, Bruner, 1966; Bateson, 1973; Belenky et al, 1986; and Donaldson, 1992).

Smith's more elementary treatment of the subject has been used here because it is easily accessible and interesting to this writer as an attempt to explain the mechanics of reflection to practitioners in the field of training and development.

He defines reflection as:

> the processing of data to create or modify meaning schemas... Meaning schemas are learned cognitive structures by which we give order or meaning to events which impinge on us. They determine the way the individual views and orders his or her world. Since meaning schemas are learned, they are neither static nor universal, and are subject to continuing confirmation or negation... (Smith, 1992, p29).

Having identified reflection as a creative act (the creation of meaning), Smith suggests that the critical phase of the creation process involves identifying and linking salient events into a meaning schema. Once they are developed, they begin to influence the perception of subsequent events and the creation of subsequent schemas, although they

themselves can be modified by subsequent schemas and events.

Acknowledging that this is a highly idiosyncratic process, Smith lists some of the factors that influence the creation of meaning schemas and the linking of events to those schemas. In listing factors, he is describing some of the dynamics of reflection. The factors include:

- time connections which lead to the engagement of cause-effect relationships or simply to the coupling of ideas and events;
- need states and emotions which influence the meanings attached to events;
- completion, meaning the resolution of incongruence;
- value-fit, the sense that something is "right" or "wrong";
- reasoning and logic patterns and techniques;
- application – the idea helps us to do something or achieve something of value to us;
- novelty or surprise – as in some forms of humour – which reveals unexpected meaning;
- the context and source of an event (a person or place) which influences the meanings attached and created;
- insight, the illumination or sense of discovery that is experienced when an idea explains something of importance;
- the cultural associations which are attached to meaning schemas.

In the day-to-day process of acting, thinking and feeling any or all of these factors are at work, consciously or unconsciously influencing whether particular events are "attended to" or noticed, and if noticed, given meaning and significance by being attached to or associated with an existing schema; and also influencing the creation and re-arrangement of the meaning schemas through which subsequent events are interpreted.

The essentially creative nature of even basic "attending" behaviour has been nicely captured by Donaldson (1992):

> Human thought deals with how things are, or at least with how they seem to us to be, but it does this in ways that typically entail some sense of how they are not – or not yet. It deals with actuality and with possibility; but some recognition of possibility is already entailed even in the discovery of actuality whenever this is achieved by the characteristically human means of asking questions. Is it like this? Or is it perhaps like that? (Donaldson, 1992, p9).

In practice, this is of course a very complex process, the dynamics of which still challenge cognitive psychology. Ulric Neisser's (1966) observation of twenty five years ago still stands – it is difficult to explain how human beings ever notice or "register" events for which they have no existing schema. Until we understand this, we will never be able to build a computer that recognises the handwriting or voice of "just anybody" who wanders along and for which the machine isn't specifically programmed. In this respect, the human brain has yet to be replicated.

Whatever the precise mechanism, in the act of conscious reflection, the researcher to a greater or lesser extent takes charge of the process of constructing meaning. Reflection not only provides a way of creating meaning, but of testing that meaning. The schemas can be used to ask "what if" questions and generate future scenarios, with the purpose of suggesting appropriate action, predicting possible outcomes of that action and evaluating those outcomes. Meaning schemas allow us to create

expectation, beliefs and fantasies of events which we have never experienced and may never experience, as well as to interpret experience and direct behaviour in the here-and-now. They also allow us to place new meaning on events which are part of our past experience – even to re-invent or remake those experiences in the way that Mintzberg (1987) describes: discerning and constructing patterns of meaning in past experiences which are only available to us because they are *past*.

As Smith observes, reflection is basic to all the phases of the action learning and action research cycles. Because the construction of meaning is happening at all phases, the researcher has the chance to become conscious of and to some extent direct the process. The Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) action research methodology mentioned earlier in the chapter, in common with many others, separates out reflection as a particular part of the cycle: plan, act, observe and reflect. This writer believes that this understates the role that it can play in the whole process, beginning with the basic act of noticing or attending to the data.

In its most developed form, as Smith (1992, p39) observes, reflection becomes a meta-process: the person is reflecting about their own reflection process, deliberately and consciously using reflection (the creation and development of meaning) to understand the way they create and develop meaning (the way they reflect). This represents the most developed form of what this writer came to label as "third position thinking" (mentioned earlier). In third position, the person becomes self-reflective, literally applying the action learning cycle to themselves: *noticing* aspects of their internal and external behaviour, and *evaluating* the impact of those behaviours on self and others, *asking* "Why do I do this?", "What's driving my behaviour?" and *planning* to do something different "next time". All of this enhances self-understanding, it develops and creates "self-meaning". At the point where the person is reflecting about how they create meaning, they are arguably in a very advanced state of "critical subjectivity", examining the very processes by which one creates meaning of both the internal and

external worlds – of self and others.

The attainment of this meta-skill of self-reflection does not, of course, mean that we can, through our own effort and "critical knowing" of ourselves, easily or completely overhaul all our meaning schemas and "remake" ourselves. At the end of the day we are, as Berger and Luckman (1966) point out, powerfully influenced and constrained by the constructs we carry with us into adulthood, and so there is every chance that we will *remake ourselves in our own image*. But arguably, it helps us in the process of research – and everyday living – to understand the relativity of our own schema, and "critical subjectivity" can help us to be aware of that relativism, and its unique nature. This writer would argue that this is also important in the process of learning and change – a proposition that will be addressed later in the thesis.

The action reflection techniques of learning:

In Chapter 4, the writer describes how she was first exposed to the concepts of adult learning (see, for example Knowles, 1978) and in particular action-based learning. She worked with academic colleagues who were trying to make clear to graduate students the concept which this writer later called "third position thinking". They had been very much influenced by the work of Argyris (1982, 1983, 1985) and Argyris and Schon (1974, 1978, 1989) – particularly the concepts of implicit theories which guide behaviour, the defensive routines which prevail in social interaction and which make some subjects "undiscussable" and "double-loop learning" which involves recognising and surfacing the theories and routines which limit effective individual and collective action.

Although being applied by the present writer's collegiate group in the context of management education, Argyris called his approach "action science", arguing that by creating a more open relationship between the researcher and those "researched", and

by surfacing and confronting the rules which govern their interaction, valid data is more likely to be collected. The techniques suggested by Argyris and practised by the writer's collegiate group are mentioned here because of the potential assistance they provide in achieving "critical subjectivity".

The concepts are not necessarily easy to grasp, and the group was using the term "meta-me" to describe the process of standing aside from oneself to observe and hear oneself in action, and to catch glimpses of the implicit theories, assumptions and values driving the behaviour.

To use the "meta-me", students were encouraged to imagine that they were capturing themselves on video- or audio-tape, and able to replay the tape slowly and repeatedly after the event. Sometimes this was achieved by literally using video- and audio-tape, but most commonly by processes of visualising past events in the imagination, by role-playing them, and by "journalising" them – that is, writing them down. The critical incident analysis described earlier is an example of this. The idea was that by writing things down or "replaying" them in other ways, one could see oneself for better or worse, recognise what might be done differently and plan – even rehearse – what that would involve.

From her own experience, the writer knows only too well that to try to be conscious of this process, to keep track of it and from time to time manage it, by deliberately shifting the gears from first, to second or third position – and back again – requires will, skill and technique.

The skills involved are numerous, and the writer's short list of required skills would include: being able to frame and ask questions; to be both patient and persistent in seeking answers; to find the time and develop the discipline of reflection; to be able to live with the uncertainty, ambiguity – and sometimes risk – implied by asking some

questions and then not finding immediate or obvious answers; to force oneself to third position, even when that is hard and uncomfortable; to live with crises of confidence in oneself and others; to stand back and sort out the difference between internal and external data, and understand the point at which they merge so completely that separation is impossible; to take responsibility for the unseen and unintended impacts of one's behaviour (both on oneself and on others); to sometimes use oneself as a litmus test (for example, to assume that if a situation is making me uncomfortable, it may be making others feel the same way); to avoid premature judgments; and sometimes, switch off completely, go to first position and just do what comes naturally!

Argyris (1990) offers some specific guidance and techniques to assist in articulating implicit theories and revealing defensive routines, and Senge (1990) has identified as a "learning discipline" the skills involved in surfacing and testing "mental models" (a concept which incorporates tacit assumptions, beliefs, implicit theories and other meaning schema). Pope and Deniculo (1992) have tackled the issue from a different perspective, tapping into the thinking of the psychologist George Kelly (1955) whose "personal construct theory" reflects a philosophical stance that human beings are continuously engaged in the process of constructing and re-constructing their reality and that "no-one needs to be a victim of his biography" (Kelly, 1955, p15). His stance as therapist and educator was to encourage clients/learners to articulate their world views and regard them as hypotheses potentially open to invalidation: "Finding better ways to help a person reconstrue his life so that he need not be the victim of his past" (Kelly, 1955, p23). Pope and Deniculo (1992, p106) have themselves used Kelly's repertory grid technique to surface personal constructs, plus techniques of concept mapping and "snakes", but they also cite techniques like stimulus recall using videotapes (Woods, 1981); diaries, logs or journals (Warner, 1971); illuminative incident analysis (Pope, 1981) and self narrative and ethnography (Elbaz, 1981).

In time, as described in Chapter 4, this writer came to develop her own set of techniques for undertaking this work, in the context of facilitating learning. However, she also came to appreciate the value of all of these approaches in helping herself as researcher to both know and stand aside from her own construction of reality – to be "critically subjective".

An example of a technique used in this way is a set of trigger questions designed to reveal the researcher's real intention in engaging in a piece of behaviour: was the real intent to tell something? to observe? to look good? to seek information? to avoid conflict or to win the support of others?

In order to use these sorts of techniques most effectively, Senge (1990) suggests that most people need the assistance of other people using what he calls the discipline of "team learning". Team learning skills include inquiring about people's ideas, assumptions and intentions; suspending judgement while they speak; actively listening to and acknowledging them; checking that the other person has understood properly; avoiding advocating one's own view; respecting differences in personal ideas, values and behaviour; guaranteeing confidentiality; and acting as colleagues not competitors.

These skills have been mentioned here not only because of their potential value in enhancing individual learning, but because of their relevance to the use of reflective techniques in research. This writer would assert that many of the reflective research techniques described next would not be effective without the use of these basic learning skills.

Reflective techniques in the research literature:

As well as being prepared to apply reflective learning techniques to the research task, the writer also became aware of techniques recommended by colleagues and described in the research literature which help to create "critical subjectivity" or "critical

knowing", and which heighten the researcher's awareness of the distinctions between the invention of personal meaning and knowledge and meaning and knowledge of value to others. For convenience, rather than conceptual purity – since the techniques overlap in practice – they have been grouped as techniques for *contexting* the construction of meaning, *cycling* reflective activities, *drawing out* meaning, *enriching* meaning and *constructively challenging* meaning.

a) Contexting

Earlier in this chapter, the writer discussed the value of *contexting* as a research skill – explicitly describing for oneself and others the context in which action is being taken, meaning is being created and theories constructed. In the act of description, the researcher not only brings the context to life but distances him or herself from the experience. A colleague added to this the practice of *data checking*: asking the researcher (individually or with the help of others) to reflect on what he or she recognises as "relevant data". This can be done by asking questions like: "What counts as data for *me*?", "What do I even notice", "What do I attend to?", "What sort of data will I go on creating (for example, by asking questions) or allow others to create (by clearing the space or setting the scene for action, or allowing action that others have initiated to continue)?" These questions can be directed to both internal data (like the feelings, thoughts and behaviour of the researcher) and external data and serve to highlight the individuality of the researcher's data.

b) Research cycling

Research cycling (Heron, 1988) is designed to help identify and manage subjectivity in the broadest sense – that is, by reminding the researcher to balance evaluation and diagnosis with action and reality testing (and vice versa). The importance of this can hardly be overstated, since no amount of disciplined "standing aside" from oneself can

compensate for a failure to carry thought and meaning into action with the regularity and discipline that are fundamental to action research. However, the process also serves to create the conditions for "critical subjectivity". It consists of deliberately designing the overall research strategy to incorporate the cycle depicted in Figure 1. For example, there might be whole phases of action in the form of participant observation in the field, followed by or interspersed with phases of interpreting and evaluating what has been said, heard or done; focussing and re-focussing the diagnosis of what's "really" happening; and planning further action.

Research cycling is not just about these larger phases of the research strategy, however. It is also about using the cycle in a disciplined way as part of particular interventions within the overall design, so that, for example, at the end of each week or each day – or even each hour of activity in some cases – the researcher engages in the process of action, evaluation, diagnosis and planning.

Used very regularly in this way, it is this writer's experience that the researcher moves from a stage of having to be "reminded to cycle" the research design to a stage of doing it so naturally that it becomes a "meta-skill" – it becomes almost automatic to "stand aside" in one's head from the action one is involved in, and observe and evaluate it as it happens. At that point, reflection has become truly integrated into every aspect of the action research cycle. This does not by itself mean that the researcher is aware of the constructs and meaning schemas he or she is using at the time; but it certainly sensitises the researcher to the limitations and possibilities created by their own behaviour.

Research cycling can be individual, collective or interactive. In individual cycling, the researcher or inquirer – to use Heron's term – has to operate as their own control mechanism, implementing the cycle on a serial basis over minutes, days, weeks, months and/or years. In collective research cycling, the inquirers operate as a group at

each phase of the cycle – either experiencing and reflecting together, and interactively, or doing things individually but side-by-side in the same space.

In interactive research cycling, the intention is to achieve a balance between some individual research cycling and some aspect of collective research cycling. This can be achieved in different ways – for example, separate individual cycles of experience and reflection can be followed by collective reflection, in which each person's individual findings are shared for feedback and discussion, and in which the content and method of the next individual cycles is planned collectively (Heron, 1988, p45).

c) Drawing out, enriching and constructively challenging meaning

The value of collective and interactive cycling is that the individual's own "learning" can be fully *drawn out* and acknowledged; shared and put side-by-side with the "knowing" of others, so that individual meaning is *enriched*, enhanced and extended by interaction with others; and evaluated and *constructively challenged* by others. (This concept is fundamental to the process of action *learning*, as pointed out by Revans, 1982, among others, but it is being suggested here that it is also important in the research context.)

For these things to happen, other, more specific skills and techniques are required. The learning disciplines of using "meta-me", team learning, surfacing and testing mental models, and action science – described earlier – are all relevant here; in fact, this writer would argue that these things are unlikely to happen, or be sustained, effectively without them.

Open-ended, non-directive interviewing (Jones, 1985) is a research technique which specifically encourages the researcher to focus on exploring and fully drawing out the ideas and perceptions of another person by using the attending and listening skills –

and respectful, unconditional attitude – articulated by Carl Rogers (1961) among others. Dialogic inquiry (as described by Cunningham, 1988) takes this to a two-way reflective process, involving reciprocal and mutual attending and listening in order to draw out meaning.

Barry Turner's (1988) approach to the development of "grounded theory" is a research technique which provides a disciplined way in which collective meaning and knowledge can be developed from individual statements and expressions of meaning. As he practises it, grounded theory construction involves a group of individuals in identifying and themselves reacting to words and phrases used by themselves and others, as a means of building hypotheses about how people actually behave, which can then be tested by observation and other means. Whether examining statements made by themselves or others, he makes the point that the researcher must actively contribute to the process by being much more than merely a "human tape recorder". All of those involved in the analysis of the data bring distinctive perspectives to the inquiry, as well as their own values and intellectual passions (Turner, 1988, p115) but in walking together and paying close and rigorous attention to the data as presented, they collectively develop new patterns of understanding and meaning from the data.

Other research techniques encourage active evaluation and constructive challenging of the researcher's theories, interpretations and conclusions. So Heron (1988, pp49-55) urges the need to find out whether there is "coherence in action" – in other words, to take the coherent viewpoint which progressively develops out of dialogic or grounded theory or related techniques, and expose it to explicit and specific testing by application in "real-life" situations. "Falsification" involves maintaining vigilance in watching for how ideas fall short when taken into practical experience. Should the researcher tend to collude in not reporting any "corrective aspects" of their experience in applying the concepts, a formal "devil's advocate" procedure can be instituted, which specifically invites rigorous attempts at falsification, and encouragers

researchers to seek out doubts even when they are most convinced of the "rightness" of their propositions. In taking the role of devil's advocate, others are invited to check the logic processes – whether inductive, deductive or abductive – through which the researcher arrived at a particular concept, idea or conclusion.

The challenge of sustaining critical subjectivity

The application of these techniques, as suggested earlier, requires of all involved parties both skill and will; including the capacity to adopt the "meta-me", to rigorously apply the team learning skills, to surface and test mental models, and to use the action science methods of Argyris to articulate and explore implicit theories and defensive routines.

Heron (1988) has suggested that the researcher also needs to be able to tolerate what he calls the sequence of "chaos and order". He observes that when researchers attempt to be open, to challenge, and avoid collusion, then clarity and divergence of thought and expression "may well collapse into confusion, uncertainty, ambiguity, disorder and chaos – with most or all of the inquirer's feeling lost to a greater or lesser degree" (Heron, 1988, p52). He concludes that it is important for researchers to be able to accept chaos, and have a high tolerance for ambiguity and confusion. He compares the inquiry process to the dissipative structure in organic and inorganic chemistry (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) in which new order is created by perturbation. While researchers cannot plan for this, and cannot say, "now let's have some chaos," they can plan to be creatively divergent, and learn to stay with the chaos, to recognise and accept it, without "anxiously trying to clean it up, without getting trapped by fear into premature and restrictive intellectual closure" (Heron, 1988, p53).

Similarly Percy (1992) has described what she calls the state of "not knowing" in the context of research activity:

> To arrive at a point of creating meaning out of the data collected without starting with an hypothesis, required an ability to tolerate ambiguity and a willingness to be vulnerable during the action research project and subsequent stage of theorising. The mental state needed before *knowing* could be arrived at was that of *not-knowing*. I had to trust myself to not know exactly what was being sought, to wait until the figure-ground formations developed into patterns. The notion is similar to Senge's (1990) concept of "suspending assumptions" as a prerequisite for dialogue, and Vaill's (1989) discussion of the Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, that is, "non-action", of not forcing movement but of going with the flow. The state of not-knowing, like incubation, was not passive. Knowing was born of not-knowing and non-action (Percy, 1992, p71).

Heron also highlights the need to manage the "unaware projections" – created by fear and defensiveness – which in his view can be triggered by the very process of inquiring into human interactions and behaviour. He compares this with the "counter-transference" to which therapists are said by some to be prone in therapy (Brown, 1961). In essence, this refers to the possibility that the researcher will see – or see and reject – in others' statements and behaviour qualities which they have difficulty in acknowledging or accepting in themselves. The researcher might also, as a result of their own unaware projections, "research extensively trivial and peripheral bits of behaviour. They may manipulate and deceive their experimental subjects. They may never ask their subjects how they construe the experimental situation and give meaning to their actions within it" (Heron, 1988, p55).

Even researchers who are aware of this kind of defensiveness, in Heron's view, may still be subject to disruption from all kinds of unfinished emotional business, which may in turn impact on the choice of their research subject and how they plan and manage the research cycle. It might result in lapses in recording data; the neglect of validity procedures; emotional and intellectual difficulty in noticing and reporting important experiences; becoming bored, distracted or rebellious about the whole research program; dysfunctional collusions of various kinds, and so on. Since it may be difficult for researchers to recognise or deal with the source of their own defensive behaviour, Heron suggests that time needs to be set aside for reflective – including

cathartic – activities like journal writing, meditation, group and individual process sessions.

Percy (1992) pursued a similar line of thinking in her research activity, observing that data generated by personal assumptions, values and beliefs that are not within the personal awareness of the researcher cannot be regarded with that combined quality of "knowingness" and objectivity which is the hallmark of "critical subjectivity".

She set herself the task of "non-defensive reflection", commenting that:

> discerning personal filters is like tuning into one instrument out of a full orchestra so that the listener can discern the flute within an orchestra of sound... I should add that I was not often quick at recognising projection, nor discovering choice, and that it was a difficult process. Argyris' (1990) model of espoused theory and theory-in-use provides a framework to explore this further. To re-own my projections can be described as my espoused theory. To convert this into a theory-in-use required a jump of the greatest significance, both cognitively and emotionally. The "jump" was rarely quick and to be honest, not often made at the time but with the safety of retrospection. It involved a long process of reflection to move out of one frame of reference to another and required a shift in my psychological state to one conducive to non-defensive reflection. Non-defensive reflection is crucial to closing the gap between the theory-in-use and espoused theory (Percy, 1992, pp68-69).

In Gestalt terms (Goodman et al, 1972) non-defensive reflection involves allowing the Gestalt to form and reform, with different elements of the Gestalt at different times becoming part of the figure (central to attention) and at other times part of the ground (the background "noise" in the orchestra).

As well as accessing personal filters and projections, through non-defensive reflection, the researcher might also access the extent to which we tend to fill up the gaps in the data we collect about others. It is not often the case that we ever get a whole picture of an organisation or hear the full story of an incident, as seen by all parties. Most often we rely on fragments, but are quick to complete the Gestalt by expanding our impression of a person or group to the whole organisation, and sometimes relying on

metaphor and analogy developed from the fragments to describe – or even – explain the whole.

The value of co-operative inquiry in sustaining critical subjectivity

The reflective techniques – and the skills required to use them effectively – described in this section involve, in differing combinations, both individual and co-operative effort. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, action research as a paradigm allows for periods of both kinds of effort, and at the very least requires balance between the two. There are other research paradigms within the interpretevist perspective that do not seek the same kind of balance. Experiential research (Cunningham, 1988) is a form of research which uses as its focus the direct experience of the person/researcher: in other words, the researcher is the "subject". Cunningham differentiates between two kinds of experiential research: a personal form, where researcher and subject are one and the same, and dialogic, where experience and/or response to experience is shared with others.

While quick to defend the value of investigating one's own behaviour and personal practice as a means of contributing to collective knowledge, Cunningham points out that a research paradigm that simply involves the researcher in reflection about themselves, without dialogue with others in any form, is not going to be given the same status as research which involves dialogue with others – even if it is the researcher's own behaviour which is being researched in both instances.

At the other extreme is the research paradigm known as "co-operative inquiry" (Reason, 1988) which involves collaborative research activity of a particular kind. In keeping with their views on the strength of social context in shaping the contents of consciousness, Kemmis (1992) and Zuber-Sherritt (1992) suggest that critical self-reflection must of necessity involve others in collaborative analysis, in order to have

any chance of penetrating the illusory definition of reality which may have been socially conferred.

Like action research, co-operative inquiry removes the distinction between researchers – the people who design, manage, and draw conclusions from the research – and subjects – the people involved in the action and experience which the research is about. Researcher and subject are "arm-in-arm" and the researcher's behaviour is also the subject of research. Co-operative inquiry goes still further, by suggesting that there is no distinction at all between researcher and subject or client – both devise, manage and draw conclusions from the research and both undergo the experiences and perform the actions that are being researched. In action research, while much is shared, it may still be the case that the researcher is an adviser to or consultant to the client as subject. Such a distinction is not made at all in co-operative inquiry.

Although not using co-operative inquiry as the exclusive research paradigm, this researcher incorporated some of the features of co-operative inquiry into her research activity. Reason's detailed description of co-operative inquiry is worth quoting, partly for that reason, but primarily because his description effectively brings to life many of the ways in which reflective techniques and skills can be applied in the context of dialogue. The cycle of co-operative inquiry as described by Reason (1988) is very similar to the action learning and action research cycles described earlier:

> A group of co-researchers meet to inquire into some aspect of their life and work. They discuss and agree *what* it is they wish to research, what *ideas* and *themes* they may bring to the inquiry; what kind of *research action* they will undertake to explore these ideas; how to observe, record, measure and otherwise gather their experience for further reflection. Stage 1 is primarily in the realm of propositional knowledge.
>
> In Stage 2 they take these decisions about research action into their lives; they engage in whatever behaviour has been agreed, note the outcomes whether these be physical, psychological, interpersonal, or social; and record their discoveries. Stage 2 may involve self-observation, reciprocal observation of other members of the inquiry group, or other agreed methods of recording experience. It is primarily in the realm of practical knowledge.

As part of this application the co-researchers (Stage 3) become fully immersed in their practice. They encounter each other and their world directly, as far as possible without preconception, bracketing off any prejudicial influence of the ideas they started with in Stage 1, and so opening themselves to novel experience and discerning so far as possible what is actually happening. They may actually forget that they are taking part in an inquiry. This deep engagement with the subject of the inquiry is in the realm of experiential knowledge, and is the touchstone of the method; it is to be contrasted with the superficial engagement of a subject in orthodox inquiry, who responds to a questionnaire or who is paid to take part in an experiment, while having at most superficial knowledge of, and interest in, what is being studied.

Having engaged deeply with their practice and experience in Stages 2 and 3, the co-researchers return in Stage 4 to reflect on their experience and attempt to make sense of it. This will involve revising and developing the ideas and models with which they entered the first cycle of inquiry, even discarding them and starting anew. This reflection involves a whole range of both cognitive and intuitive forms of knowing; its expression may be primarily propositional, but may also involve stories, pictures, and other ways of giving voice to aspects of experience which cannot be captured in propositions. When this making sense has been

> completed, the co-researchers can consider how to engage on further cycles of inquiry (Reason, 1988, pp4–5, emphases in original).

As will be explored later, this researcher attempted to incorporate the techniques of co-operative inquiry into many aspects of the research strategy. At the outset she had mixed success, because of a failure to grasp that co-operative inquiry means just that – co-operation. Heron (1988, p55) reminds us that truly co-operative inquiry involves sustained authentic collaboration that is not possible if the process is contaminated by differences in power or status.

Heron (1988) observes that an inquiry is most co-operative if it can maximise both the distinctive individuality of the inquirers and the collective reciprocal effect of their working together. Individual reflection needs to be both autonomous and:

> fully open to influence by my experience, your experience, your reflection on my experience, your reflection on my reflection, and vice versa; and all this in relation to each person in the inquiry group. Of course, this is all a counsel of perfection. For any given inquiry one adopts that form of cycling ... that seems best suited to the subject-matter of the inquiry, and that offers an accessible and manageable balance between individual and collective effects (Heron, 1988, pp 45-46).

<u>The creation of meaning through narrative story telling and writing</u>

So far, the writer has attempted to describe some of the ways in which meaning is created through the use of reflective techniques – some deriving from human learning and development applications and some from research applications; some able to be used effectively by the individual in isolation from others, and others dependent on dialogue between people.

As this program of research continued, the researcher had the opportunity to apply these techniques herself and to develop the skills required to use them. Some were used regularly and others only intermittently. But because the paradigm in use was

action research, the research techniques being used became themselves an object of inquiry and reflection. This chapter represents one product of that process: the researcher's statement of the techniques available to – and to varying extents – incorporated in her personal praxis, plus evaluation of the status of the techniques and their value in generating meaning and knowledge which has value for self and others. At the same time as developing her research praxis, the writer was developing her learning praxis: the techniques which she could use effectively in helping herself and other adults to learn and change. She was also trying to develop her understanding as to why these techniques are helpful in developing meaning – whether in a research setting where the objective is the development of knowledge which is useful to others, or in a learning situation, where the objective is change in behaviour through the development of new insight (meaning) in relation to oneself.

Inevitably, these activities became interlinked, so that experiences and conclusions in relation to one of these tasks were applied and used in relation to the other two.

Perhaps the clearest – and most significant – example of this interlinking is the way the writer developed her understanding and use of the reflective processes involved in the creation of narrative – whether written or oral. She came increasingly to appreciate the importance of bringing critical analysis to bear on the products of spontaneous narrative – initially the telling and writing of ideas and, later, the telling and writing of stories.

At the outset, this researcher had a perception of what constituted data collection, data capture and data analysis that was very much the product of many years of academic and applied exposure to the hypothetico-deductive method for knowledge generation within the structural functionalist research paradigm (Kerlinger, 1964). Within the discipline of psychology, she was familiar with and had frequently applied the research tools of experiment, of systematic observation, of surveying and structured

interviewing, and the sampling and statistical techniques used to manipulate and interpret the data produced by those tools.

This background proved to be very useful when operating within the interpretivist framework, since it meant the researcher was used to the discipline of keeping and organising detailed notes and other records; of articulating the conceptual frameworks and structures used in planning interviews and other interventions.

As the work progressed, she became increasingly aware of the extent to which her planned interventions and the actual event were substantially different, and of just how much was invented or created through the process of interaction with others – whether clients, colleagues or anybody else with whom she came into contact. If she had only attended to those things which proceeded as planned, if she had excluded all the accidental or unplanned experiences to which she was subject, she would not have effectively progressed the achievement of any of her tasks – the development of her learning praxis, her research praxis and the theory which would help to explain aspects of both.

Yet the business of capturing "unplanned" data proved to be formidable. She rarely went out without pen and paper and if "caught" without them would use anything that came to hand to make notes while events, experiences and ideas were fresh in her mind. She also became extremely attentive to the words and phrases used by others in conversation. As Jones (1985) puts it:

> all interpretation involves making sense of things – deciding they "mean" something or other ... though we use dress, gesture, touch and even smell to communicate meaning, the most sophisticated way we do it is through language. For this reason interactionist research is typically very interested in what people say. What they say stands for what they mean – what the interactionist is interested in (Jones, 1985, p94).

Talking, as Jones observed, can take place in an interview, but unlike the positivist use

of the interview, the point is not to gain evidence of the speaker's ideas and activities we have decided *we* want to investigate, but to explore the way the other person sees the world. "Unlike the positivist, we want no preconceived ideas. Therefore we want no leading questions. We do not want our actors to go where we lead them. We want to go where they lead us" (Jones, 1985, p94).

The interpretivist's problem is exactly the opposite of that faced by the positivist researcher: instead of clearly imposing a structure on events, the interpretivist is concerned lest any imposed structure destroy the integrity or authenticity of what happens. The "interviewer effect" is such that in subtle and not so subtle ways, the researcher influences the data by telling "the subject" enough to produce what we wanted to hear about anyway.

An overlay on this is the possibility of the co-called "desirability effect" – the proposition (supported by research interviews) that people respond in ways that they think the other person will approve of. To quote Jones yet again:

> since we soon come to believe that others will interpret our behaviour, our *own* interpretative abilities allow us to manipulate the interpretation to suit our vision of ourselves. We use our capacity to be *self-reflective* in order to present the person we wish others to think we are. We play roles in a *creative* way to elicit from others the responses we desire. In effect, we manage, or orchestrate, the responses of others by presenting the image of our self we wish them to hold. We become actors on the stage of life, writing our own lines (Jones, 1985, p95).

Arguably, then, in any encounter – whether devised or unplanned, whether for research purposes or any other, the participants in the action are both creating themselves, and, to use Morgan's (1983) phrase "meeting themselves". To quote him (and partly requote words cited earlier in this thesis):

> In conversation, as in research, we meet ourselves. Both are forms of social interaction in which our choice of words and action return to confront us ... because of the kind of discourse, knowledge or action that we help to generate... When we engage in action research, thought and interpretation, we are not

> simply involved in instrumental processes of acquiring knowledge, but in processes through which we actually make and remake ourselves as human beings (Morgan, 1983, p373).

This researcher's own reflection on these words – and subsequently, on her experiences – had at least two outcomes. One was to understand the importance of capturing words and phases as she and others produced them, and to find effective ways to do that. Writing down everything that is being said can be powerfully reinforcing – and therefore manipulative – of other people's behaviour, just as Jones (1985) reminds us. It can also destroy the sometimes fragile and tentative, and sometimes energetic and robust flow of conversation during which ideas – and meaning – is being explored, created, confirmed or rejected. To rely on one's memory after the event can be difficult, to continually carry round and use a tape-recorder would be both inconvenient and intrusive.

This researcher eventually developed a habit of writing down – almost casually, certainly with economy of movement and gesture – key words and phrases at the time, if it could be done without being dysfunctional in the ways already described. It frequently could be done, because she worked largely in consultancy and academic settings where note taking is not considered a strange or unusual part of social interaction.

She combined this with a habit of using a journal in which to write reflectively and at length about what had happened during events and conversations that day. The journal was often – but not always – used daily for that purpose, but was always used at least weekly throughout the course of the research project. She also continued her existing practice of maintaining case files in relation to each consultancy intervention. This entire process combined quite "messy" features (dozens of manilla folders containing scribbled notes and jottings) with others that were more systematic (journal entries and case files).

The power of narrative in the creation of meaning

What has been described so far is really just the mechanics of keeping track of some of the data created by action research. The second outcome was almost a "quantum leap" in this researcher's own appreciation of just how powerful the acts of spontaneously talking and writing about things that matter to people are – in and of – themselves, not just in describing their realities, but in discovering them, creating them and changing them. In the light of everything that has been said already in this thesis, this perhaps sounds like a trite statement. And in many ways, this was knowledge that the researcher already had, long before she started this research program. She already "knew", from her work as a counsellor that the act of talking about oneself can be very helpful, partly because of the release of emotion that sometimes accompanies it, partly because it feels good to be on the receiving end of somebody else's attention and regard, and partly because in talking about a problem we sometimes gain added insight into what the problem is and how we might deal with it (Carkhuff, 1969). She "knew" that the application of symbols – whether words or picture – to experience and ideas enhances their meaning (Gendlin, 1970). But very often, the application of this knowledge had been overlaid with much structure – the kind of structure that arises when dialogue is used both for learning and research purposes. For example, in training sessions, she would go to great lengths to structure the dialogue – with planned periods for "plenary" discussion, for "brainstorming", for "small group work", for "evaluation", for "role-playing". In research work, she would plan interviews, group discussions, and observational sessions. All this is done with a view to producing an outcome in a particular way, by a particular time. Done effectively, these things take great skill – and much of this writer's attention and energy had gone into the acquisition of these skills.

It has been her experience, however, that these things eventually became sophisticated distractions from her understanding and experiencing the very basic "truth" of Morgan's

statement (cited earlier on p60) that in action research we make and remake ourselves as human beings. She came to believe that she had seriously underestimated – both as a means of generating useful knowledge in research and as a way of facilitating the kind of knowledge that leads to personal learning and change – the value of simply creating the space for telling and listening to people's narrative, to their stories; for telling her own; for writing her own and for reading the stories of others.

In the context of learning, and facilitating learning in others, she was reminded by a colleague of the value of asking people to tell and re-tell – and sometimes tell yet again – the "story" of an incident or relate the history of the group or their own personal contribution to something; she noticed that with each telling, the story is enriched and extended, with a sense of deeper layers of meaning as well as more complete connections with people or things that in the first telling have been in the background of the Gestalt. Themes or patterns of meaning emerge – are noticed or created – which were not always obvious to either teller or listener on the first telling. The telling and re-telling creates a clarity of perspective that incorporates the paradoxical qualities of closeness and distance that "critical knowing" is about. In the telling, one "owns" the story fully and in the same moment, sometimes lets go of it, moves on. She also learned that the way the story is told is often as important as the content of the story – that the teller brings to the telling, no matter how brief it is, important "bits" of themselves and that these small bits often accurately represent and reflect the whole.

The value of these concepts for understanding and explaining and facilitating learning is explored more fully in the following chapters. As a researcher, this writer became very interested in the value of story telling and writing as ways of creating knowledge that would be of value to others as well as herself.

The research value of "talk" has been described by Jones (1985), by Heron (1988), by Cunningham (1988), by Morgan (1983) and by Reason and Hawkins (1988) among

others. Morgan (1983) points out that we sometimes need to go on talking for as long as we need to, until we can't create any more useful meanings, and also highlights the value of re-cycling our records and memories of earlier conversations, re-visiting them with the wisdom of accumulated experience and learning and gaining different perspectives from the re-reading, as we can do from the face-to-face re-telling.

Reason and Hawkins (1988) in *Story-telling as Inquiry* suggest that through *expression*, the meaning of experience is not simply communicated but is discovered and/or created. As a result, the medium and the meaning are essentially interpenetrating – it is foolish to ask the meaning of a story or painting as separate from the work in itself. And sometimes the meaning is released and made manifest by the medium, as expressed by Michelangelo in his statement that he did not create his sculptures, only released them from the stone (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p81).

They also observe that the expression of experiences in Western culture is often seen as belonging to the realm of the creative arts, to the production of the beautiful or entertaining, rather than to the world of science. However, they suggest that psychotherapy – which in the Freudian school grew in part out of the scientific medical tradition – very soon had to incorporate story telling – both in the process of therapy and in its product (the therapeutic case-study).

They observe that in hermeneutics, this does not mean that any study qualifies as science but that science consists of taking studies seriously. Since in their view the "best" studies in everyday life are those which stimulate or stir up people's minds, hearts and souls, and in doing so give them new insights into themselves and their environments, the issue is not just whether story telling is science but whether science can learn to tell good stories (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p83). They then pose the questions: "How do we use stories as inquiry?", "How do we draw forth meaning through story telling?" and "What are the stages in the process of meaning creation in

and through stories?"

They begin by describing the processes followed by social scientists who, having entered a field situation, proceed to gather information, and identify themes based on their experiences there; these themes are woven into a descriptive case-study, which contains within it a "pattern model" of explanation; they then compare and contrast case- studies, perhaps seeking new cases to fill out the categories, so they can develop a typology which might in turn lead to the development of a general theory.

In personal story telling, they suggest a similar progression through levels or stages of development, from basic description to metaphor – which captures meanings and patterns in experience which are difficult to capture in any other way – and, in society as a whole, to the development of ways of understanding or interpreting the world and our experience of it. Personal stories thus, over time, become sagas through entering collective local folklore, and finally fairy tales or myths as their archetypical patterns become increasingly divorced from their original content and context.

> Thus we have two paths of inquiry: from experience through explanation to general theory; and from experience through expression to myth and archetype. Thus we create between them a space for dialogue and for a dialectical development, so that a theme may be illuminated by a story or a theory may clarify a myth. Indeed, some of the most illuminating researchers have used both paths ... (as in) ... Freud's use of the Oedipal myth ... and (the way in which) ... modern physicists have turned to the metaphors of wave and particle to illuminate and express their mathematical formulations of matter and energy (Reason & Hawkins, 1988, p85).

They describe some of the techniques they have used to develop story telling as a form of collective inquiry. For example, the story teller would be encouraged to write the story down first, and then read the story aloud, so adding tone and feeling to the words on the page. The listener might then read the story back, using *their* style and tone. The original story begins in this way to take on a separate life of its own, since the original teller hears their own story in a new way, seeing it not only as part of

themselves but also as distant from themselves ("critical subjectivity"). At the same time, the story telling also awakens different reactions and perspectives in the audience. In a workshop situation, people might re-tell the story in their own words or respond with a story of their own.

They observe how quickly a story told in this way moves from belonging to an individual and becomes part of the collective, tapping into shared experiences and values, but also helping to define the boundaries or limits to that shared experiences.

They describe what they have done as creating a *dialectic of expression*, that is quite different from the debate or dialectic between opposing explanations. In the manner of grounded theory, the response of the story teller and the listeners to the telling and re-telling of the story creates a process which catches and contributes different aspects of the whole, both focussing and extending the range and levels of meaning contained in the original story. As a group moves beyond description and seeks for explanation through the story telling process, another dialectic emerges, as expression illuminates explanation and vice versa.

They caution that the task of the researcher is to allow an appropriate balance between the use of story telling to create meaning (whether in the form of description or explanation) and the use of other dialogues and dialectics which deliberately and constructively challenge, test and evaluate the products of the story telling dialectics. For example, a group within an organisation might use story telling to develop metaphors which capture the existing culture of the place, but this metaphor might simply reflect a collective defensive projection which needs to be held up to the light and be seen for what it is – one version of "reality".

As a practice issue, they re-iterate that it is important to establish a method of inquiry which honours expression as well as explanation, that does not rush prematurely into

explanation, that invites individuals and groups to search for the images and metaphors which do justice to their experience, which capture the essence of that experience before seeking to find the reason for it. So the simple invitation to "tell me the story" evokes a different response from "can you tell me why...?"

Story telling and story writing were increasingly included in this writer's research praxis, as well as into her praxis as a learner and learning facilitator. She used story telling and writing very often to create dialogue with others that served to surface and develop meaning – both in terms of descriptions and attempted explanations of experience and ideas. The results of that dialogue are set out in Chapter 4. However, she also used story writing to create her own, internal dialectic – a dialogue with herself. This dialogue took place within the pages of her journal, but finally had its most sustained manifestation in the writing of the thesis itself – nearly every sentence of which caused the writer to reflect on what was being written, as well as making her aware of – and even more determined to use – the power of expression in the terms that Reason and Hawkins (1988) described.

But is it research?

However, the question is whether, without the external dialectic this kind of expressive and reflective writing still counts as "research activity". In other words, does it "count" as a research tool if it was produced without having been read out loud to others and without having become the source of the kind of dialogue with others described – and so valued – by Reason and Hawkins (1988)? This might seem like a fine point – why be so concerned about whether this kind of writing "counts"? This writer believes that it is an important issue, even in the context of action research which requires the researcher to balance action and private reflection with collective inquiry. To devalue the enormous amount of private or internal dialogue that accompanies interactive research of any kind, and which is certainly involved in the

production of a thesis, is to discount data that is potentially very valuable.

In her own case, as already mentioned, she had, over five years, produced literally thousands of journal entries, notes on the margins of articles and papers, workshop outlines, exercises to facilitate action and learning on the part of clients and students, lecture notes and handout materials. In Reason and Hawkins' terms, they were very powerful forms of expression – of story writing. Between them, they told the story of the interaction between the external data (the writer's professional and life experience) and the internal data (the frameworks – ultimately to be thought of as an evolving praxis – which guided her behaviour, her instinctive ways of doing things and her emotional as well as intellectual reactions).

Action research coupled with action learning were certainly generating a powerful process of data generation, collection and analysis. The keeping of notes particularly in the form of a learning journal (Boud, 1985) was providing a way to capture that process as it happened, day-by-day. But something else was needed for the story to be told coherently, as an integrated account of a complex series of experiences and reflections. In using exactly those words in conversation with a colleague one day, an answer was offered: tell it as a story, but tell it as a particular story – yours, your "autobiography". And use the autobiographical method not just as a vehicle for *reporting* the data, but as an integral part of the methodology used to *generate* and analyse it.

On closer study, it seemed to this writer that autobiography, like biography, has primarily attracted the attention of sociologists as a method of research. Autobiography is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "writing the story of one's own life." With some notable exceptions including Gordon Allport's (1942) *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*, it's this writer's observation that psychologists as a professional group have not systematically recognised the

production and reading of autobiographies – or biographies – as a means of expanding the knowledge base of their discipline.

By contrast, Bertaux (1981) writing from a sociological perspective in *Biography and Society* has suggested that biography – and autobiography – offer a powerful means of transforming sociological practice. He and the others who have contributed to this volume offer many perspectives and frameworks for analysing and interpreting the content of biographical and autobiographical material.

Bertaux notes that autobiography is relevant as a source of data not only when we read the autobiography of others, but when we write our own. In encouraging the use of story-telling – including the telling of one's own story – he is seeing it as a method of extending the wisdom and praxis of sociologists.

He notes that:

> narration need not be atheoretical, but it forces the theoretician to theorise *about something concrete* (his italics). If its form is simple, it can be used to convey highly complex contents... ...as it forces us to transcend that analytic stage, at which we stop too often, and to move towards synthesis (Bertaux, 1981, p44).

This was the use made of autobiography – or story writing – by this researcher. The act of writing – as much as the telling of the story to other people – became increasingly a means of generating data, and making sense of and synthesising it as well as simply reporting it.

In this way the keeping of the journal and other notes, and the production of the thesis itself became research tools. In *The Way of The Thesis*, Turner (1989) compares thesis writing to a craft, involving the skilled application of tools to both *creating* and *uncovering* the subject matter. Through the application of craft skills, the thesis writer searches out, constructs and sustains a good argument or contention (a thesis). The

argument is carried on with oneself and with others, through the process of construction and search, "when you have brought understanding to the reader, you begin to grow wisdom for yourself" (Turner, 1989, p35).

The use of *journal writing* as a means of not only recording experience but making sense of it in various ways has a long and multi-cultural history (Rainer, 1980). Rainer believes that the first diaries that were not essentially historical records were written by Japanese women in the tenth century. Their diaries were used to explore subjective fantasises and dreams, not just external events. Carl Jung (1875–1961) used the keeping of a diary to develop much of his psychological theory – including his theory of collective unconscious, recording his dreams and fantasies of recurring images and symbols.

In using a journal or diary in this way, the keeper of the journal is not simply collecting field notes. Both Rainer (1980) and psychologist Ira Progoff (1975) have written detailed accounts of the journal techniques which can be used to facilitate the development of understanding and changed behaviour. Progoff's *Intensive Journal Method* is a very systematic approach through which one maintains "a continuing confrontation with oneself in the midst of life," as a "psychological laboratory" in which personal growth is recorded and studied to bring the outer and inner parts of one's experience into harmony.

Anais Nin (1903–1977) not only published her own diaries (1966–1976) but collaborated with Tristine Rainer for some years in teaching journal workshops. Their approach suggests four basic uses of the diary: as a means of *catharsis* (the release or expression of feelings and the accessing of emotion); as a means of *description* and recollection (probably the most common form of diary expression, capturing and recording reality – or at least the way we experience it, through our senses); as a means of accessing the imagination, through *free, intuitive writing* (Rainer believes that this

can also be a means of getting in touch with personal creativity and the unconscious mind, by removing or putting aside the control of the conscious mind); and, as a means of *reflection,* in which the intellect contemplates experience and develops ideas, solves problems and at times integrates catharsis, description and intuition. In this way, the diary is used to access four aspects of the person – that which comes from the heart, the senses, the imagination and the head (Rainer, 1980).

The use of diary or journal techniques as a means of facilitating management development has also been developed and propounded in more recent times (see, for example, Boud, 1985).

There is, of course, a difference between keeping a journal and writing a thesis. Both require the integration of separate and diverse experiences and ideas into one coherent account, or in the case of a thesis – a sustained argument. But the methods of writing described above give some idea of how the process of writing extends well beyond the recording of experience to include an active role in double-loop learning.

To re-emphasise Turner's point however, the telling of a *whole story* – through the mechanism of writing a thesis – is different from the cathartic, descriptive, intuitive and reflective purposes which might be served by writing about isolated and separate incidents. The need to make connections between many different sets of ideas, to tie the story back to an essential thread of argument or contention and to make sense of a broad range of experiences over a long period of time, offers the potential for a deeper, richer and more sustained insight for both the writer and the reader.

The writer should make it clear at this point that she did not regard the production of a thesis as being literally the same thing as writing one's life history. But she did come to see the thesis as providing, amongst other things, an opportunity to use personal story writing – of the kind contained in Chapter 4 – as a research activity that could –

and did – generate personal meaning.

Having become convinced that it did, the question remains whether it should be taken seriously as an activity for generating collective knowledge. In other words, does it create meaning and knowledge that is of use to others? This assumes that in writing the story itself (not just in her activities in the field) the writer is capable of maintaining "critical subjectivity" of the kind so extensively explored in this chapter. Hankiss (1981) *On the Mythological Rearranging of One's Life History* has observed that:

> Everyone builds his or her own theory about the history and the course of his or her life by attempting to classify his or her particular successes and fortunes, gifts and choices, favourable and unfavourable elements of his or her fate according to a coherent, explanatory principle and to incorporate them within a *historical unit*. In other words, everybody tries, in one way or another, to build up his or her ontology.
>
> *Specific mechanisms* are involved in this building process. Human memory selects, emphasises, rearranges and gives new colour to everything that happened in reality; and, more important, it endows certain fundamental episodes with a symbolic meaning, often to the point of turning them almost into myths, by locating them at a focal point of the explanatory system of the self. It is through this system that what a person has to say about himself is expressed in a particular way, for instance by telling stories having others than himself as protagonists: one finds out about people through the way in which they talk about others.
>
> This *mythological rearranging* plays a specific *instrumental* role within the self-regulating system of the psyche which allows the subject to smoothly incorporate his past and his own life-history into the strategy, or "script" of his present life (Hankiss, 1981, pp203–204).

In other words, the writer might engage in a kind of personal myth-making, as opposed to the collective myth-making described by Reason and Hawkins (1988).

Without the exercise of critical subjectivity, the sort of integrated story telling contained in Chapter 4 cannot be regarded as research activity in and of itself – although it might become the object of someone else's research activity in the same

way that Ferrarotti (1981) suggests that the study of other people's biographies and autobiographies is a legitimate way of studying the larger phenomenon of an organisation or society. It becomes, to borrow again the words used earlier, simply another story – possibly a good one, but not one that creates directly transferable meaning and knowledge that is of value to others. If they try to apply the personal meaning constructed by the writer, there is a chance that they are applying someone else's myths to their own reality.

In practice, this writer could think of no other way to integrate the complex and large body of experience – comprising action, feeling and thought over five years, some of it generated by others and shared with the researcher, some of it generated by the researcher alone and shared with others, and some of it generated in company with others. In telling the story, she takes care to describe how she attempted to maintain critical subjectivity during the research activity itself – and also indicates the times when this was completely missing. She describes how she tested her conclusions, and developed her theory; how she modified her constructs in the light of her experience. In writing the story, she has attempted to be both close and distant, to adopt the perspective of "meta-me". If she has constructed a myth or fantasy, she at least has aimed to write about it in such a way as to make the entry into mythology as visible as possible, both to herself and others. Story telling, when coupled with action research, at least produces a story that no longer represents one person's unchallenged view of the world, but exposes the means by which that view was acquired. The individual's "third position thinking" is on full display and can be readily critiqued by people other than themselves.

The value of the individual case-study

Of course, action research – whether exploring an intervention by a group of people in one organisation, or exploring one person's interventions in dozens of organisations –

still carries the limitations of all case-study research, that it produces purely "local" knowledge, even if that local knowledge is internally valid.

Gummeson (1991) gives a helpful summary of the ways in which case-studies can be of use. He notes that case-studies can be used in several different ways. The first way is to attempt to derive general conclusions from a limited number of cases (it serves the purpose of efficiency). A second way is to arrive at specific conclusions which are particular to this one case because this one case is for some reason important (it might represent a "land mark" as in case-law). Individual cases can also be used to generate change – to "show case" or "sell" an idea that would otherwise not be acted upon by others. He then provides an excellent summary of the argument for and against it as a research methodology. Most of the arguments against it are raised when it is used to derive general conclusions from a limited number of cases, on the grounds that it lacks statistical validity and is hard to replicate (the test for reliability). He suggests, as do Susman and Everard (1978) who were cited so much earlier in this chapter, that in practice, the most important advantage of case-study research is the opportunity it provides for holism – that is, to enable us to study many different aspects of the phenomenon, to study those aspects in relation to each other and to view the phenomenon within its total environment (Gummeson, 1991).

This writer would contend that a story based on action research has another and even more important value. If it is done well, it can provide a template against which the reader can review his or her own experiences – and thus becomes a trigger for third position thinking in others. If this kind of personal review and reflection were happening face-to-face, that would be called "immediacy" (Carkuff, 1969). When it happens through the pages of a book, we might call it something else but it can sometimes have something of the same power. Most of us have had the experience at some time of being challenged and stimulated to think about our own lives when reading an account of someone else's. To be stimulated by an account of someone else's

thinking process is perhaps more unusual, but hopefully possible.

The value of this project – and of this story – should then be assessed in terms of the thinking that it stimulated in others, rather than whether it is representative of the experiences of others. In other words, examining this sea-shell (the story of how praxis was created and discovered) might not enable you to reliably infer anything about the construction of the universe, but if in examining this one sea-shell the reader becomes interested in exploring his or her own story and praxis then it has served a practical purpose, and possibly made the most enduring kind of contribution – both to the craft of management development and to the continuing effort to understand it more completely.

Capturing the data of experience

This chapter has reviewed in some depth some of the key research issues which confront all action researchers, and some which were particularly important given the subject of this research, with its focus on reflective techniques as tools for learning and research.

As indicated, this writer's research methodologies incorporated all five of Cunningham's (1988) methods for conducting "wholistic interactive research: collaborative research, dialogic research, experiential research, action research and contextual locating, plus the use of narrative.

It remains now to summarise the particular types of data which were both "created" and "found" during the course of the study and the use made of them. (The reader might recall that the last of Blaikie's questions identified right at the beginning of this chapter were: "How do I collect data?" and "How do I make sense of it when I've collected it?")

Action researchers have access to all the known methods used by social scientists, managers and other practitioners to generate and analyse data, ranging from "traditional" approaches such as survey methods, interviews and case-studies through to co-operative inquiry (Reason, 1988) and the production of narrative (Yin, 1987).

As mentioned already this researcher had access to a huge amount of data during the course of the study. Specifically, she was able to tap into:

- what others had to say about their personal experience as adult learners or as facilitators of learning;

- what others said or wrote about what they believe or think in relation to adult learning generally;

- her own observation of what others do when learning or assisting others to learn;

- her own experience as a learner and facilitator of learning.

The approach taken to capture data contained elements that were both planned and unplanned. Both components were initially "driven" by the central research question set out at the beginning of Chapter 1:

- How can adults – and particularly managers – be effectively helped when they consider changing their behaviour and attempting to do things in new or modified ways?

To address them, the researcher planned and carried out the following interventions:

- a series of interviews with individual managers who had reported the achievement of significant behavioural change;

- a series of co-operative practice sessions and inquiry with academic and private practitioners in the field of management development;

- review of the literature relating to the management of behavioural change in adults, particularly in the contexts of organisational life and management roles.

These interventions were "planned" in the sense that at the beginning of the project, the researcher had decided that these particular events "needed" to happen, at some point in time. Carr and Kemmis (1986) would call this a "defined cycle" of research. By contrast, as is the nature of much action research, a great many things happened during the project which could not be planned in the same way. The researcher knew that she would have a great many conversations and experiences with both clients, students and colleagues over the course of the project which would be relevant but which could not be predicted in advance or "made to happen" in quite the same way. Much of the data was generated spontaneously and was accessed in an opportunistic fashion, "seizing the moments" as they presented themselves. The extent of this data has already been described and the major part of this chapter has tried to capture the action reflection techniques used in observing and participating, recording and reflecting upon that experience, experimenting with and refining the interventions made, and subjecting the results to continuing cycles of observation and analysis, involving both self and others.

Interviews with managers

An interview is defined here as a structured conversation, in which specific questions are asked and the answers recorded, in whole or in part, manually or electronically.

Certainly, finding managers to speak to was not particularly difficult. The researcher wanted to spend two hours interviewing each of six managers who had impressed others with whom they worked as having achieved noticeable and significant change in some aspect of their management behaviour – change that was not "hearsay" but had actually been observed by others.

It should be pointed out that at this early stage of the research activity, the researcher had not focussed her inquiry as directly on the place that reflection has to play in learning and behavioural change as she came to do subsequently. Nor was she concerned with achieving a representative sample. She sought these people out as a reaction to having difficulty in working with a particular client group. The question was asked almost in a spirit of frustration – "What *does* it take to get you guys to change?" As a result she looked for the managers in particular places – three large organisations (containing more than 1000 people) which were different in terms of industry and culture. What they had in common was that they were current clients of the researcher and had provided her with significant challenges in her professional practice.

Six managers were found (two in each organisation) by asking three senior executives in each organisation to think of people who fitted the criteria described earlier. Senior executives had been approached, rather than human resources specialists because the latter were considered to be less likely to see people in action on the job. In each case, a surprisingly small number of names was given (surprising to the researcher, who had expected that in large organisations there would be many examples).

In any event, despite the fact that the researcher went to some trouble to locate and interview these managers, the data so generated has not been included in the main body of the experiences described in Chapter 4, for reasons that will now be explained.

When the researcher contacted the managers, she described the nature of the research project and said that she wanted to talk to them about the ways in which they had tackled their own development as managers. The specific questions were not given in advance, because the researcher wanted spontaneous answers to questions rather than prepared ones. Her perception was that the questions would need elaboration (perhaps through examples) in order to make clear sense to the people being interviewed. She was also interested to explore the sorts of elaboration that might be needed – and preferred to do that face-to-face when the questions were first put. This would have been impossible to do if the questions had been sent to the managers in advance.

When the researcher subsequently met with the managers individually, the attempt to conduct a "systematic" interview by working through each of the questions and allocating a predetermined proportion of time to each one was quickly abandoned. The researcher would prefer to call these "conversations" rather than interviews, since about the only thing that the researcher "managed" throughout the meetings was the time, place and the focussing of the discussion on the subject of attempting change in one's behaviour as a manager. The way in which the topic was handled varied considerably across all six conversations.

It should also be reported that the conversations were both stimulating (all lasted for at least two hours) and very difficult. All the managers had to think about the questions and all seemed to struggle in some way to articulate answers.

There were three basic trigger questions:

- what sort of things have triggered significant learning for you? (learning was defined as a shift in practice, not just in understanding);

- would you mind describing the learning and why it was important to you?;

- what sorts of things do you think trigger learning for senior managers generally? What does it take for them to learn?

The managers spoke about the sorts of events (in both their professional and private lives) that had triggered learning. They all – without exception – described the sort of things which Mumford (1980), Snell (1988) and McCall et al (1988) would describe as coming from challenging and difficult experiences in the "school of hard knocks". These had the effect of depressing this researcher/practitioner considerably: if that's what triggers learning, how can a management educator stand a chance, short of engineering major catastrophes in the lives of her clients and students?

As the action research process went on, the researcher started to see these interviews as being important, not for the data they generated directly, but for the thinking they generated for the researcher. To the question: "What can *I* do that will make a difference?" gradually emerged a different kind of answer, that was about readiness for learning not only being a response to significant life events, but also a state of being that can be profoundly influenced by the way the person understands and uses their learning skills.

The outcome was that these interviews provided a powerful incentive for the researcher to persist in developing her practice and efforts at learning to learn – if for no other reason than that she didn't fancy her chances of always being lucky enough to work with managers who had just undergone a significant professional or life experience. Only a passing reference is made to these interviews in Chapter 4, but these comments will hopefully have put them in context.

<u>Practice and inquiry sessions with colleagues</u>

The researcher also wanted to work with colleagues in exploring their own ideas and practices in the field of management development – not simply to gain their views, but

to work actively together in developing answers.

Finding colleagues to work with in this way proved to be much more difficult than finding the managers had been. The researcher's immediate collegiate group at the RMIT, within the then Department of Administrative Studies, was the initial focus of her interest. She was keen to invite them to be involved and approached them with enthusiasm, expecting that they would be interested in the subject matter – as it affected their own professional practice.

The reaction from the five people approached was a surprise. All were courteous, wished the researcher well with the assignment, but declined to participate. This was very unexpected and the researcher's private reactions certainly couldn't be described as objective and scholarly. It had seemed to her such an "inherently good idea" – to explore one's strategies for assisting people to develop and one's reasons for using them. These were all capable people whose work was admired and respected by the researcher – indeed, as described in Chapter 4 – her own efforts had been largely modelled on their example. As a group, they had in the past been very generous in directing the researcher to literature and outlining the processes used in the courses they conducted at the RMIT.

Why were they now so reluctant to participate in the process? There had been several reasons given – it would take time that they didn't have right now (one person); it wasn't a very good idea for a colleague "to do research" on or with another colleague (one person). Two people were "still doing a lot of thinking" about their courses and their approach; and one person answered the question by avoiding it – simply continually postponing the time for further discussion of the issue.

It was interesting to ponder on what had prompted these reactions – first to individual conversations and then to a group discussion. The researcher's first assumption was that it was something to do with her own behaviour – that the invitations had been offered in

a way that was inappropriate, that inadvertently she had offended in some way, or that the people didn't like or trust her sufficiently to want to work with her in this way.

After letting some time elapse (about 6 weeks) she asked the individuals whether any of these things was an issue. The responses from two were that the topic was a difficult one and that the researcher should "come back in a couple of years when I've sorted things out." Two suggested that there were differences in the group around methodologies anyway and that it was a time for the group to consolidate and not run the risk of "splitting apart again." The other person said that they thought the issue was not an appropriate one to research in a collegiate group, and should be conducted with people who were not known to the researcher.

This entire episode forced the researcher to "rethink" a major part of her methodology. Her judgement was that to try and force the issue by "talking people into it" would be both intrusive and unproductive. Instead, she decided to let the matter drop for the time being.

In the following months and years (in fact, up to the time of writing) the researcher was working with three of the five individuals in designing and delivering development interventions – whether in the context of RMIT's courses or in consultancy practice. Encounters and discussions with these two were the subject of diary work and reflection in the same way as any others. However, when the time came to write about the experience – to put them in context in this "autobiography" – the writer (not the researcher) found it helpful to pull together the ongoing experience of working and talking with each one, and to give a clear and focussed account of the data as it related to each. The result is a series of individual stories about working with each of these individuals. The series also includes the experience of working with one consultant who was in private practice and at no time met or had anything to do with the RMIT group.

Working with clients and students

"Unplanned" interventions offer particular challenges to the action researcher – some to do with the mechanics of data capture and analysis and some to do with the ethics of participant observation.

For most of the situations in which data were generated and collected in this study, the use of electronic aids was not feasible or appropriate – given that much of the action took place in classes or in consulting situations.

The researcher had to rely on field notes – usually made in rough form during individual and group discussions, during breaks in sessions and at the end of the day's work. These rough notes became the basis of a journal which was used not only to record what had been said or what had happened, but to continue the process of reflection and analysis which had already begun with the initial note-taking.

The researcher also maintained extensive client files as a normal part of her consultancy practice. These files contain background material, briefing notes and any documentation generated or obtained during the life of the consultancy. However, a section of each file consists of a systematic case review, organised around the following headings:

- the *stated* aims of the consultancy;
- the actual outcomes and impacts;
- the action taken;

- what was learned from the consultancy;

- what would be done differently "next time".

The files remained an important means of data capture and processing during the life of the project.

It is important to acknowledge again that analysis of the data was actually happening as the data was being created. In a class of Master's candidates or in a consultancy exercise, the task as construed by this writer is generally not to pass on information and ideas, but to create them in partnership with others.

Since the Master of Business in Management/Organisation Change and Development is itself based on action learning methods, a major agenda is actively reviewing the processes through which candidates learn, solve problems and effectively intervene in organisational settings. Their experience in doing these things is the subject of discussion and analysis, and the constructs for describing and explaining those experiences are themselves created by the participants.

Usually the researcher's role would be to offer a process for "managing" the discussion, but the use of the processes and certainly the content and outcome of the discussions themselves were most frequently in the hands of the participants. This way of working with people was – and is – also fundamental to her consultancy practice, which is much less about training, teaching or advising than it is about creating situations in which individuals and groups can explore and solve their own problems, or meet their own challenges.

Working in this way, the data were simultaneously "generated", "collected" and "analysed". Mostly the conclusions were reached and insights gained in partnership

with others, either working one-to-one, in small groups (of between thee and ten people), or in large groups (generally numbering between twenty and fifty people, but occasionally reaching as many as two hundred).

Casual conversations, as well as the kind of professional dialogue which Jones (1985) calls "talk", sitting listening to others or reading the words of others – these were all forms of dialogue which stimulate the reflective thinking process.

The work done privately was that of systematically summarising the insights and experiences gained in dialogue with others, and of creating more and more concise summaries of those things.

This chapter has already described in some detail the methods used in this research project to capture the action research data and to ensure its systematic processing. They consisted chiefly of research cycling on a monthly – and at times a weekly – basis, critical incident analysis, co-operative collegiate inquiry and non-defensive reflection. These strategies were used to inject as much internal validity as possible into the process of data capture and reflection.

To assess the external validity of the experiences reported here, the researcher has used contextual locating and triangulation.
For ease of presentation, the data relating to clients and students have been presented in Chapter 4 as a series of vignettes – some involving quite long contacts (over two or more years) and others of much shorter duration. These have been woven into an "incident history" or narrative which maps the development of both the researcher's praxis and the development of her personal "theory".

This narrative also describes the process through which the broad research issues which triggered the project were progressively refined and focussed to those set out in Chapter

1, namely:

- how does reflection help us to develop our understanding of ourselves in ways that help us to learn?

- what practical reflective techniques work?

- how do our tacit or implicit "theories" about ourselves guide our behaviour, and does it help to make implicit theories (Argyris & Schon, 1978) explicit?

- how can the practitioner – the educator or facilitator of learning in others – use reflection to understand and develop his or her own practice, with its suite of acknowledged and unacknowledged "theories", and to effectively integrate those theories with practice?

- and how does the researcher tap into, make use of, test and perhaps refine the stock of existing theory and knowledge?

An endnote: An ethical issue in data capture in action research

This researcher did not set out deliberately to explore and expound on the ethical issues involved in action research, but believes that it is an important obligation to surface any ethical issues or dilemmas encountered during the research process. In this case, she encountered a recurring challenge as a participant-observer who has unplanned and spontaneous opportunities to create and reflect on the experience of herself and others, and herself in dialogue and action with others.

The dilemma in many situations is one of declaration of one's interest and intentions around research, as compared with learning. As life-long learners, it can be argued that

all adults have the opportunity – even the responsibility – to learn from most of life's experiences. As learners, even when learning is very focussed and driven by particular areas of concern or interest – as in the case of the practitioner deliberately developing their professional praxis – it is not usually the case that we announce our intentions to learn something or our experience of having learned something, although from time to time we might do both of these things.

In action learning, however, where at least some of the learning takes place in company with other "declared" learners, these announcements are often a necessary part of the process. We say to each other: "This is what I'm keen to learn to do differently or better, and I would appreciate your assistance and support during that process." In this way a "deal" or learning contract is made with ourselves and others. This writer – as learner – made many such "deals" during the course of this project, deals about what might be learned with and through other people.

In the role of researcher, however, where experiences with others will potentially be written down in a public document, there is an important addition to be made to the deal. The researcher needs to signal the research intentions and establish ground rules about issues of confidentiality in reporting. That was a relatively straightforward process to manage, in the experience of this researcher.

What she experienced as more difficult, were the times when profound – sometimes painful – learning took place in unplanned, "unsolicited" dialogue with others, where she had not held up a cue card in advance reading "anything you say or demonstrate to me may be written down in my thesis." The point here is that once an experience has shaped either practice (what the practitioner does) or theory (the way the practitioner thinks) it cannot be "unlearned" or discarded. It can't be "bracketed out" of the equation. Sometimes it is possible – and important – to acknowledge to others that "unplanned" learning is taking place, or has taken place, and to check the other person's

experience of the event(s). At other times, it may not be possible or appropriate, given the circumstances and timing of the dialogue and the nature of the relationship with others involved.

This researcher has reported these learnings in ways that protect the identity of those involved but needs to acknowledge the large quantities of experience – or data – which were handed to her by others without their awareness or consent.

Chapter 3: Reflection as a technique for individual and organisational learning and change

The previous chapter attempted to define reflection and describe the way it contributes in the context of action learning and action research.

Smith's (1992, p29) definition of reflection was offered:

> the processing of data to create or modify meaning schemas... Meaning schemas are learned cognitive structures by which we give order or meaning to events which impinge on us. They determine the way the individual views and orders his or her world. Since meaning schemas are learned, they are neither static nor universal, and are subject to continuing confirmation or negation.

"Higher-order" reflection, from the "third position" was also described – a position from which one "thinks about one's own thinking", and engages in "double-loop learning" (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

This chapter attempts to put the capacity for reflection – both for organisations and individuals – into the context of contemporary organisational life. It is argued that it has significant value as a tool for assisting organisations as collective entities and individual human beings to learn and develop in productive ways in the face of discontinuity and complex change as we approach the new millennium (just six years away at the time of writing!). The concept of organisational and personal "re-invention" (Goss et al, 1993) is explored as a key capability at this time in our history.

Having made a case for its importance as a capability, the chapter examines some of the challenges which face individuals – including managers and consultants – who attempt to use reflection as a way of significantly and usefully enhancing their own and their organisation's ways of dealing with and managing change.

Finally, the chapter explores concepts and techniques from the organisational

management learning literature which have been developed to assist individuals and organisations to enhance their reflective capacity, with a particular focus on "double-loop" learning and reflection (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

Since reflection is only one – although this writer would argue a key one – of the many tools that are available to facilitate the process of learning, along the way this chapter attempts to put action learning into context by relating it to the seminal work of Knowles (1984) and Revans (1982) in the field of adult learning.

A brief summary of the major insights gained by this writer from the literature is set out right at the end of the chapter.

The age of discontinuity and information

Peter Drucker (1969) in *The Age of Discontinuity* argued that the world was entering a phase of discontinuity – a period in which change would be continuous, often fast, and involving transformative not just incremental shifts in technology, organisational practice and in many aspects of society as a whole. Similarly Tofler (1981) saw the world as experiencing a new wave of development that was not simply a continuation of what had been in the past.

Naisbitt (1982) diagnosed ten "megatrends" or "major transformations" taking place in society; while Hickman and Silva (1988) described "eight dimensions of the corporate future":

- globalisation of markets, capital and production cycles;

- collaboration and strategic alliances between former competitors;

- new approaches to attracting capital;
- new alliances between the public and private sectors;
- new forms of organisation;
- social responsibility and ethics;
- integrating subcultures;
- individual fulfilment.

Driving these organisational responses is what Freed (1992) has aptly called "relentless innovation": humankind's capacity to invent – and effectively implement – new ideas and possibilities affecting almost every facet of human life and behaviour. This capacity for innovation is "relentless" in the sense that no society or political regime can successfully stifle it; it is increasingly global enterprise or community which owns and spreads the fruits of innovation; and technology itself is now harnessed for the process of invention and implementation – most spectacularly in the use of computers to "invent" computers.

The result, Freed notes, is a global age characterised by generic uncertainty and deep instability, in which the critical commodity is knowledge; the critical skill is creating, identifying and applying the right knowledge; and competitive advantage rests almost solely on the ability to learn, and to act on the learning.

This is the so-called "post-industrial age", the age of information and information technology, characterised by interactive multi-media; global knowledge networks and information "super-highways"; and a rate of innovation which means that most of the

knowledge which will be in use in organisations in the first decade of the millennium has not yet been invented (Lepani, 1994).

There are already glimpses of the next age, shaped by the emerging convergence between biotechnology, information technology and the power of miniaturisation to produce molecular computers – the age of "nanotechnology", and its accompanying "mindware", which envisages new ways of working with the human mind to meet the challenges of the pace and scope of change unleashed by information and technology and nanotechnology. (See, for example, Varela, 1991.) Lansbury (1992, p6) puts all this into an historical perspective:

> Living as we do at the end of the twentieth century, we are experiencing an explosion of knowledge and change which has been unequalled in the history of human civilisation. To illustrate this fact, it has been estimated that if the total experience of the human species was divided into 800 lifetimes, it is only in the last six that it has been possible to measure time with any precision, only in the last two that anyone has used an electric motor, and the overwhelming majority of material goods that we use in our daily lives have been developed in this, our 800th life time.

It was Igor Ansoff (1988), one of the most influential thinkers and writers in the field of strategic management, who perhaps most clearly alerted the Western world to the fact that discontinuity requires organisation strategies and forms which can cope not so much with an extraordinary degree of change but a different kind of change. An organisation is facing discontinuous change when its past does not prepare it for the future:

> One test of the degree of discontinuity is the extent to which the firm makes a departure from the market needs it knows how to serve, from the technology on which the firm's products are based, or from the geographical, economic, cultural, social, or political settings in which it knows how to do business (Ansoff, 1988, p92).

Ansoff saw the need not only for new organisational structures and cultures, but for new managerial "mindsets". As Table 1 indicates, Ansoff saw older, serial, continuous

change as producing "competitive" organisation cultures responsive to customers and intent on gaining market share. Random, episodic, discontinuous change, on the other hand, requires an entrepreneurial culture.

Table 1: Competitive vs Entrepreneurial Cultures

Competitive	Entrepreneurial
CHANGE serial incremental continual	CHANGE random episodic discontinuous
GOAL DRIVEN optimise profitability	OPPORTUNITY DRIVEN optimise potential
WORLD VIEW intra-firm intra-national	WORLD VIEW multi-industry multi-national
VALUES economic rewards power conformity stability	VALUES economic rewards personal fulfilment deviance change
SKILLS participative goal-setting extrapolative planning	SKILLS charismatic vision-creating creative planning novel problem-solving

(From Limerick, 1992, p41)

Kanter (1989, p20) also was one of the first to argue that organisations need ways to achieve "... faster action, more creative manoeuvring, more flexibility, and closer partnerships with employees and customers ... more agile, limber management that pursues opportunity without being bogged down by cumbersome structures or weighty procedures that impede action."

At a national level, Australia, in common with most advanced industrial societies has seen major restructuring and reform at both macro-economic and micro-economic (workplace) levels. (See, for example, Dunphy, 1990.) Lansbury (1992) describes some of the major organisational impacts in these terms:

- the replacement of traditional economies of scale with economies of scope (meaning that the highly programmable nature of new technology allows a single facility to produce greater variety without significant increase in cost); this means that the workforce must be able to be quickly and inexpensively re-deployed to produce a different product if the market changes, which in turn requires a more flexible and multi-skilled workforce and more adaptive form of organisation;

- the development of technologies which often require major changes in work rules and organisation; as well as needing to learn new skills, flatter organisational hierarchies mean workers are required to be more "self-managing";

- as simple tasks are taken over by machines, the remaining work is increasingly complex and requires a high level of interdependence among employees; teams or project groups are often formed to undertake specific assignments, then disbanded; since these teams may cut across established lines of authority and demarcation, new forms of work organisation are required, such as matrix and network systems, in which the hierarchies and power relations are no longer so clearly defined; in these contexts, retraining and re-learning becomes an integral part of the job;

- similarly, Limerick (1992) describes "network organisations" which have the capacity to build and use internal and external (including, where necessary,

> global) relationships which are fluid, less hierarchical and which rely on information technology rather than cumbersome management control systems for their effectiveness and responsiveness.

The learning organisation and its implications for reflective capability

In all that has been outlined so far in this chapter, a recurring theme is apparent: the importance of knowledge and learning capability as a key organisational and individual response to the requirements of a world driven by discontinuity, innovation, information and knowledge.

> In an economy where the only certainty is uncertainty, the one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge. When markets shift, technologies proliferate, competitors multiply, and products become obsolete almost overnight, successful companies are those that consistently create new knowledge, disseminate it widely through the organisation, and quickly embody it in new technologies and products. These activities define the "knowledge-creating" company, whose sole business is continuous innovation (Nonaka, 1991, p96).

For this writer, the implication to be drawn is that the kind of learning and knowledge creation that requires fundamental shifts in mindsets, that is continual and which requires a constant questioning not only of how to do things, but what needs to be done, requires, of necessity, a capacity for reflection that includes reflection upon the self – the third position entailed in "double-loop learning" (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Indeed, Ansoff's (1988) definition of discontinuity – a state where the past does not prepare one for the future – would seem to make double-loop learning a necessity for organisational survival.

The self that is the object of reflection might be an organisation, a team or an individual, but in each case, the requirement seems to be that nothing be taken for granted, that the actors themselves, and their way of doing business, are as much caught up in the business of change as the services, products and environments on and in which they operate.

It is in this vein that McGill et al (1992) write about the need for organisations to re-invent themselves through the process of generative learning and transformative change (which they directly equate with double-loop learning).

> "Generative" learning emphasises continuous experimentation and feedback in an ongoing examination of the very way organisations go about defining and solving problems. Managers in the companies demonstrate behaviours of openness, systemic thinking, creativity, self-efficacy and empathy. By contrast, adaptive or single-loop learning focuses on solving problems in the present without examining the appropriateness of current learning behaviours (McGill et al, 1992, p5).

Similarly, Goss et al (1993) write about companies whose need and skill is not simply to improve themselves but to re-invent themselves, to create a powerful new vision and then to manage the present from the future, to use the new vision to create a new self or *being*.

> ... we Westerners have few mental hooks or even words for excursions into being. They call it *kokoro* (Nonaka, 1991). In contrast, Westerners typically assess their progression through adulthood in terms of personal wealth or levels of accomplishments. To the Japanese, merely *doing* these things is meaningless unless one is able to become deeper and wiser along the way (Goss et al, 1993, p101).

This writer was interested to explore what the literature has to say about how these processes of generative learning and re-invention can be made to happen. Certainly, the capacity of organisations to engage in collective learning – either right across the organisation entity or in substantial bits of it – has been the subject of a "substantial and rapidly growing body of rhetoric" (Sharratt & Field, 1993, p129).

It is the writer's impression that while much of the literature uses the term organisational learning, and suggests the things that organisations need to do in order to be better at collective learning, inevitably – since the organisations are composed of individuals – much of what is discussed concerns the ways in which individuals behave.

Very little of the literature on organisational learning attempts to tightly define – or even define at all – any differences between organisational and individual learning. There is, of course, a body of literature devoted to the concepts and practice of adult learning, which was established well before the current spate of literature on organisation learning. This writer begins the chapter with a brief review of the more recent literature focussed on organisational learning, noting the implications that has for individuals; then as the chapter proceeds, focuses more specifically on what the literature – including some of the counselling and adult learning literature – has to suggest in the way of techniques that help to develop the reflective capability of individuals. The concepts of organisational learning, learning organisations and learning environments have been pursued by, among many others, Morgan (1986, 1988), Garratt (1990), Senge (1990), Pedler et al (1991), Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) and Sofo (1993).

It is interesting to note, in passing, that the word *learn* is derived from Middle Higher German *lesa* meaning "to follow or find the track, to follow, to go after." The Latin *lira* means "the earth thrown up between two furrows" (Klein, 1971). As Percy (1993) observes, the dimensions implied here are those of deepening, pursuing, and churning over.

Some definitions of *organisational learning* include the following:

> Organisational learning means the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).
>
> An entity learns if, through its processing of information, the range of its potential behaviours is changed (Huber, 1991).
>
> Organisations are seen as learning by encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour (Levitt & March, 1988).

For these writers, organisational learning goes well beyond the notion of structured training and the development of competencies. For them:

> learning is the way in which individuals and groups acquire, interpret, re-organise, change or assimilate clusters of information, skills, values, attitudes and feelings ... (while) the organisational (or workplace) learning environment refers to the learning "climate" in an organisation, and is a key facet of organisational culture. The learning environment is influenced by a combination of aspects of organisational life such as management, decision-making processes, workplace structures, work practices, physical setting and organisational values. These combine to informally, formally and incidentally enhance and encourage individual and organisational learning at all levels (Kempin, 1994, p5).

Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) has been a major stimulant to thinking and practice in the field of organisational and individual learning. Senge identified three skills which he sees as being critical in the age of discontinuity: skill in managing the complexity associated with interdependence and globalism; the creative orientation and mastery needed by organisations and individuals in building, sharing and implementing powerful visions; and skills in reflective conversation and dialogue. More will be said about Senge's work later in this chapter, but publication of his book either triggered – or was closely associated with – a widespread interest in the subject of learning.

Goss et al (1993) offer some very interesting examples of organisations – some of them very large multi-national corporations – who have successfully incorporated into their business planning and practice what can only be described as high order learning strategies, including reflective techniques. Their comments are quoted extensively here because the organisations they examine represent very significant global examples of organisational learning.

These were all organisations which were prepared to break, and re-create, the mould in which they were doing business – if not the mould for the entire operation, at least for the very core parts of it essential to the success of the business mission and strategy.

Goss et al suggest that these companies did a number of things very well (the italics throughout have been inserted by the writer of this thesis to highlight those aspects of the commentary that relate to the *reflective* capacity of the organisation concerned).

- *They were able to assemble a critical mass of key stakeholders.* The authors' comments about this are interesting:

> Leading pilgrims on the journey of re-inventing an organisation should never be left to the top eight or ten executives. It is deceptively easy to generate consensus among this group; they usually are a tight fraternity, *and it is difficult to spark deep self-examination among them*. If there are revelations, they may never extend beyond this circle.
>
> As proven by the experiences of such companies as Ford, British Petroleum, Chase Bank, AT & T, Europcar, Thomas Cook, and Haazen-Dazs, this group must encompass a critical mass of stakeholders – the employees "who really make things happen around here." Some hold sway over key resources. Others are central to informal opinion networks. The group may often include critical but seldom-seen people like key technologies and leading process engineers. The goal is a flywheel effect, where enough key players get involved and enrolled that it creates a momentum to carry the process forward (Goss et al, 1993, p105).

- *They undertook a complete organisational audit*: a thorough ("third position") investigation designed to reveal and confront the company's true competitive position.

> The best approach is through a *diagnosis* that generates a complete picture of how the organisation really works: what *assumptions* are we making about our strategic position and customer needs that may no longer be valid? Which functions are most influential, and will they be as important in the future as they were in the past? What are the key systems that drive the business? What are the core competencies or skills of the enterprise? What are the shared values and idiosyncrasies that comprise the organisation's being? (Goss et al, 1993, p106).

- *They created a sense of urgency, discussing the undiscussable.*

> There is a *code of silence* in most corporations that conceals the full extent of a corporation's competitive weakness. But a threat that everyone perceives and no one talks about is far more debilitating to a

> company than a threat that has been clearly revealed. *Companies, like people, tend to be at least as sick as their secrets* (Goss et al, 1993, p106).

- *They effectively harnessed contention.*

> There is an obscure law of cybernetics – the law of requisite variety – that postulates that any system must encourage and incorporate variety internally if it is to cope with variety externally... Almost all significant norm-breaking opinions or behaviour in social systems are synonymous with conflict. *Paradoxically, most organisations suppress contention*; many managers, among others, cannot stand to be confronted because they assume they should be "in charge". But control kills invention, learning and commitment. Conflict jump-starts the creative process... Contrary to what many Westerners might think about the importance of consensus in Japanese culture, institutionalised conflict is an integral part of Japanese management. At Honda, any employee, however junior, can call for a *waigaya* session. The rules are that people lay their cards on the table and speak directly about problems. Nothing is out of bounds. *Waigaya legitimises tension so that learning can take place. The Japanese have learned to disagree without being disagreeable and to harness conflict in a wide variety of ingenious ways* (Goss et al, 1993, p107).

- *They engineer organisational breakdowns.*

> It's clear that re-invention is a rocky path and that there will be many breakdowns along the way: systems that threaten to fall apart, deadlines that can't be met, schisms that seem impossible to mend. But just as contention in an organisation can be highly productive, *these breakdowns make it possible for organisations to take a hard look at themselves and confront the work of reinvention*. When an organisation sets out to reinvent itself, breakdowns should happen by design rather than accident... The executive teams must identify the core competencies they wish to build, the soft spots in existing capabilities, and the projects that, if undertaken, will build new muscles (Goss et al, 1993, p108).

McGill et al (1993) also offer some striking examples of organisations that seem to have successfully engaged in what the authors describe as generative learning – including Arthur Anderson (USA), Taco Bell, Whirlpool and BP (UK). They, too, offer some conclusions about the management practices that characterise these learning organisations:

> The key ingredient lies in *how* organisations process their managerial experiences. Learning organisations/managers *learn* from their experiences rather than being *bound* by their past experiences. What does it mean to learn from experience? William Tolbert, in *Learning from Experience*, writes "Learning involves becoming aware of the qualities, patterns, and consequences of one's own experience as one experiences it." Drawing upon Tolbert, one can define four different but related levels of organisation experience: (1) the external world – environment, competitors, customers, and the like; (2) the organisation's/manager's own actions – strategy, policies and procedures, management practices and so on; (3) the organisation's/manager's own problem-identification, problem-definition and problem-solving processes – culture, expertise, and functional orientation, for example; and (4) organisational consciousness – the experience of all of the above.

Adaptive organisations experience events *only one level at a time*, and this exclusive focus limits learning to that level... What are the managerial practices found in generative learning organisations?... Management practices encourage, recognise, and reward those managers whose behaviours reflect five dimensions: openness, systemic thinking, creativity, a sense of efficacy and empathy (McGill et al, 1992, p10).

Sharratt and Field's (1993) review of the organisational learning literature notes a number of recurring themes, each of which has some interesting implications for what an organisation's – and an individual's – reflective capabilities need to be. The first theme is the *need for organisations to develop a brain-like culture*. Morgan (1986) contrasts the traditional organisation (where thinking and doing are split, where each section and division is a well-defined subject of the whole, the structure is bureaucratic and processes are algorithmic) with the learning organisation (where each part of the organisation encapsulates the whole, there is an emphasis on holistic thinking and planning, structures tend to be more fluid and interlacing, and processes rely more heavily on intuition and guesstimates when data is unavailable). This suggests that reflection needs to be a process that brings thinking and action close together (both in time and space), that it is something which transcends organisational structures, and that it incorporates holistic and intuitive thinking as well as fact-based logic.

A second theme is the *need for learning to take place at all levels of the organisation as a whole*. From this perspective, organisational learning cannot be treated as a discrete event or technique like structured training sessions, involving discrete groups of individuals from particular levels or sections of the organisation. Reflection emerges as a collective, social act which brings together people from all levels and functions.

A third theme is the *importance of the organisation's absorptive capacity* (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990): the capacity of an organisation to process and exploit valuable information without getting overwhelmed. While this concept includes relatively straightforward ideas such as the extent to which managers know their market, it generally includes mechanisms and responsive patterns which go beyond the capacity of any one category or employee to implement. It suggests that sense-making involves inter-disciplinary or cross-functional effort in which information and ideas are regularly shared, distilled and collectively brought to bear on complex or important organisational issues.

A fourth theme is the *importance of recognising the learning potential of planning*. Mintzberg's (1987) description of the crafting of corporate strategy cited earlier in this thesis, balances the notions of *deliberate* (planned) strategy with *emergent* (flexible) strategy; balances the time of "quantum leaps" with periods of consolidation; balances cycles of convergence and divergence; balances thinking and action. For Mintzberg, the learning organisation is one in which planning enables the organisation to transform its understanding of its past, experiment with new behaviours, and create new visions and options for the future. It is an organisation in which distinguished "craftspeople" are both inspired visionaries and inventors, *and* masters of detail, noticing and finding strategies, patterns and visions for the future that form from their own behaviour, as well as from sudden flashes of illumination.

For Mintzberg, as for Ansoff (1985), effective planning and learning are about dealing

successfully with today's world while creating the world one wants for tomorrow. These are very important concepts, given this writer's observation that much of the literature tends to imply that change is something to be reacted to, that living in the age of discontinuity is a bit like riding a bucking horse, and that all one can do is hold on tight. Indeed the very definition of discontinuity (cited earlier) suggests that experience counts for nothing when faced with such change. Both Mintzberg and Ansoff have been at the forefront of those who suggest that effective change management and learning (and by implication, for this writer, reflection itself) contain both reactive and creative elements, for which both experience and vision are essential. In this respect, their thinking is reflected in the comments of McGill et al (1992) and Goss et al (1993) cited earlier.

De Gues (1988) is another writer who examined the learning potential of planning processes especially when opportunities exist to explore and reflect on different scenarios in a non-judgemental environment and to value the personal experience of contributors.

The fifth theme identified by Sharratt and Field is the *need to go beyond "single-loop learning"*. As discussed in the previous chapter, Argyris and Schon (1978) adopted the term single-loop learning from cybernetics to describe the process of judging achievements solely in relation to pre-determined goals (as in *Management by Objectives* and most appraisal systems). They saw "double-loop learning" (on-going judgement of the adequacy of organisational goals) and "learning to learn" (improving the capacity of individuals, groups and the organisation as a whole to learn) as key elements of the learning organisation.

Any one of these themes provides a rich and productive opportunity for thinking and research. It was to the last theme, however, that the present writer was drawn, since it implies that learning is a skill in its own right – possibly a "meta-skill" which generates

other skills – and that double-loop learning is potentially the most important learning skill of it, since it is the one which unlocks the other learning skills, both for organisations and individuals.

The previous chapter linked double-loop learning with "third position" reflection, and the concepts of "critical knowing" and "critical subjectivity". It is this aspect of reflective capability which has most pre-occupied and interested this writer in the course of her own practice, and it is the one to which the major part of this chapter is devoted.

Before turning to that, however, it is useful to consider the challenges involved for organisations and the individuals within them, including managers, who would take seriously the effort to develop collective and individual capabilities, including the capacity for sustained and deep reflection.

The challenge of learning in organisational settings

Kempin's (1994) review of the learning literature notes that while individual learning is a pre-condition for organisational learning, it is not sufficient: the learning capacity of a group can be significantly lower than that of the individuals involved unless a range of complementary organisational values, behaviours, attitudes, structures and processes are present to support and encourage learning.

He has identified from the literature eight key characteristics of organisations which positively and effectively facilitate individual and organisational learning:

- a clear, shared organisational vision;

- open and effective communication, co-operation and the sharing of information

and skills;

- participative decision-making and greater equity in work relationships;

- organisational structures and individual work roles which are flexible and facilitate team work;

- individual reflection on experience and organisational review of practices;

- identification of individual and organisational learning goals;

- a physical environment which produces energy, creativity and motivation;

- active encouragement and support of new ideas, experimentation, innovative practices and questioning without fear of punishment.

This is a long and interesting list, which highlights both the potential fragility of organisational learning as well as the complexity of the variables involved. Certainly Goss et al's (1993) review highlighted the importance of focus and commitment on the part of the CEO as being critical in major organisation-wide "reinvention".

Sharrat and Field (1993), having declared their interest in translating organisational learning rhetoric into reality, relate some of their own practical experiences in trying to do so as well as the findings of their own Australian survey of human resource development managers, representing thirty-one different public and private sector organisations.

They conclude that there are significant barriers to organisational learning, including organisational design (most frequently rated as the least supportive of the elements

examined), limitations in the understanding which managers and supervisors have of learning, poor planning and information sharing, limited organisational commitment, and limited understanding (at all levels) of the potential for computer technology to facilitate learning.

While this is only one study, its findings are suggestive of the difficulties, in a purely organisational sense, which surround the creation of learning organisations.

These difficulties – or challenges – are very real ones for anyone who is interested in facilitating learning in organisational settings or in enhancing their own learning. Even without them, the challenge is considerable, given the context of change, uncertainty and turbulence described earlier. As Vaill (1989) asks: how much change, how much uncertainty and how much turbulence can the modern manager handle?

He offers the metaphor of canoeing in "permanent white water", of continual energy and movement. In this environment, things are only very partially under control, yet there is a skilled way of effectively navigating the rapids, that is not the same as random or aimless behaviour. He argues that intelligence, experience and skill are all being executed, albeit in ways that are hard to perceive and describe.

He also cites the metaphor of "Chinese baseball", a mythical game which is just like American baseball in all but one respect: in Chinese baseball, whenever the ball is in the air, anyone is allowed to pick up any base and move it – anywhere. In this "game", there is a time to try and score runs, and a time when trying to score runs would be disastrous. Learning to recognise those times becomes absolutely critical.

With Chinese baseball, Vaill points out, we are talking about a game which no one knows how to play and which entails some serious re-thinking of the rules – including some of the traditional rules about what management work is and how managers need to

behave. In particular, Vaill suggests seven "myths" about management which will not survive in the world of permanent white water and Chinese baseball. These are:

- the myth of a single person called "the manager" or "the leader";
- the myth that what the leader leads and the manager manages is a single, free-standing organisation;
- the myth of control through a pyramidal chain of command;
- the myth of the organisation as pure instrument for the attaining of official objectives;
- the myth of the irrelevance of culture;
- the myth of a product as the organisation's primary output;
- the myth of rational analysis as the chief means of understanding and directing the organisation.

It can be argued that Vaill's seven "myths" represent a fairly complete and concise summary of much of what the management literature suggests about the changing role of those who are titled managers. The point to be made here is that for those who take on the role of manager, the ground rules appear to be changing in some fundamental ways. Whatever the speed of these changes, they represent challenges that can only be met, in this writer's view, by people who are able to facilitate their own continuous learning as well as the continuous learning of others.

Some of the barriers to creating learning organisations have already been mentioned. But in addition to those barriers, this writer would contend that possibly the biggest

hurdle to creating the conditions under which people learn (both collectively and individually) – and learn to learn – is that we are still in the relatively early stages of discovering how to facilitate the kind of learning required in the age of discontinuity. This line of thinking is explored in the next section of this chapter. The reader needs to bear in mind the assumption of the writer that most of what is related here about adult learning implies a fundamental capacity for "sense-making" or reflection.

Facilitating adult learning

> ... learning and changing ... are two of the most basic yet least effectively performed human activities. Learning has been defined as "the process by which behaviour is modified as the result of education and experience" (Mussen et al, 1969). Attempts to understand how learning occurs, and how the continuing interaction between individuals and their environment leads to changes in people's capacity to perform, have been the pre-occupation of behavioural scientists for many decades. Yet it is still not possible to present a complete set of theoretical learning principles which are applicable to all circumstances (Lansbury, 1992).

There *have* been many, many attempts – and it is well beyond the scope of this thesis to helpfully review or even summarise them. Before discussing their collective limitations, however, it is impossible not to acknowledge the seminal work of Reg Revans (1982) and Malcolm Knowles (1978) in the field of adult learning.

The Origins and Growth of Action Learning (Revans, 1982) gives a very comprehensive account of Revan's thinking about the theory and practice of action learning over the last fifty years. As Lessem notes in the introduction to that book, Revans was a pioneer who faced continuous scepticism and hostility – particularly in his own country – in the development of his ideas. Yet Revans not only persisted in finding practical ways to help individuals in organisational settings to learn from and in action, he also tried to develop theoretical explanations for the practices he espoused. "The paradigm of system beta", "the psychology of the deliberated random" and "action learning and epistemology" are all attempts to ground his practice in well-reasoned

constructs.

Whatever the value of his theories, his practice has provided the inspiration for many who in subsequent years have tried to develop their understanding and most particularly, their practice in this field.

Malcolm Knowles in *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (1984, first published 1973) has provided a comprehensive overview of learning theory, including both the "propounders" and the "interpreters" of theory, and suggests that Reese and Overton's (1970) distinction between mechanistic and organismic models or world views gives us a helpful way of grouping learning theories. The mechanistic model offers a view of humankind that is reactive, passive, robot-like, and which sees activity as the result of external forces. The organismic model offers a view that is active, *self-reflective*, and which emphasises the significance of the role of experience in facilitating or inhibiting the course of development.

The work of the Gestalt psychologists such as Koffka (1935), of Piaget (1970) and Bruner (1961), and of Combs and Syngg (1959), among many others, falls clearly into the organismic model, as does the thinking of Knowles himself.

The flavour of the organismic view of the world has been caught by Pittenger and Good (1971):

- people behave in terms of what is real to them and what is related to themselves at the moment of action;

- learning is a process of discovering and reflecting upon personal relationships to and with people, things and ideas;

- when people recognise some inadequacy in the way they currently differentiate or relate to their world, they will try to change it;

- the role of the teacher is to facilitate that process;

- given a healthy organism, positive environmental influences and a non-restrictive set of percepts of self, there appears to be no foreseeable end to the perceptions possible for the individual;

- learning is permanent to the extent that it generates problems that may be shared by others and to the degree that continued sharing itself is enhancing.

Knowles says of himself (1984, p51) that he spent more than three decades trying to formulate a theory of adult learning that takes into account what is known from experience and research about the unique characteristics of adult learners. This "androgogical" theory of adult learning reflects the earlier work of Lindeman (1926) who Knowles believes identified the foundation stones of modern adult learning theory; namely the assumptions that:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; therefore, these are the appropriate starting points for organising adult learning activities.

2. Adults' orientation to learning is life-centred; therefore, the appropriate units for organising adult learning are life situations, not subjects.

3. Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.

4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it.

5. Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning (Knowles, 1984, p31).

In his own writing, Knowles takes these assumptions and develops them still further. He was particularly keen to match the assumptions or principles about adult learning with some androgogical principles of adult teaching.

Reflecting on oneself – the challenge

Arguably one of the most practical techniques described by Knowles (1984, pp222-233) is the formulation of "learning contracts" – a "deal" that the learner makes with him or herself, and others in a learning group or community, to identify and then meet a developmental need which has the potential to make a significant difference to the performance of the individual.

It has been the attempt to work through the contracting process with a large number of individuals in a very varied range of organisational settings, that has alerted this writer to the challenges inherent in diagnosing learning needs accurately and helpfully. At its very best – in others words, when it provides the greatest leverage for changes in behaviour which are of value to the self and others – diagnosis or identification of learning needs engages the deepest levels of reflection, from "third position", resulting in "double-loop" learning, and "re-invention" of some part of oneself.

Table 2: The role of the teacher

Conditions of learning	Principles of teaching
The learners feel a need to learn.	1. The teacher exposes students to new possibilities of self-fulfilment. 2. The teacher helps each student clarify his own aspirations for improved behaviour. 3. The teacher helps each student diagnose the gap between his aspiration and his present level of performance. 4. The teacher helps the students identify the life problems they experience because of the gaps in their personal equipment.
The learning environment is characterised by physical comfort, mutual trust and respect, mutual helpfulness, freedom of expression, and acceptance of differences.	5. The teacher provides physical conditions that are comfortable (as to seating, smoking, temperature, ventilation, lighting, decoration) and conducive to interaction preferably, no person sitting behind another person). 6. The teacher accepts each student as a person of worth and respects his feelings and ideas. 7. The teacher seeks to build relationships of mutual trust and helpfulness among the students by encouraging co-operative activities and refraining from inducing competitiveness and judgementalness. 8. The teacher exposes his own feelings and contributes his resources as a colearner in the spirit of mutual inquiry.
The learners perceive the goals of a learning experience to be their goals.	9. The teacher involves the students in a mutual process of formulating learning objectives in which the needs of the students, of the institution, of the teacher, of the subject matter, and of the society are taken into account.
The learners accept a share of the responsibility for planning and operating a learning experience, and therefore have a feeling of commit- ment towards it.	10. The teacher shares his thinking about options available in the designing of learning experiences and the selection of materials and methods and involves the students in deciding among these options jointly.
The learners participate actively in the learning process.	11. The teacher helps the students organise themselves (project groups, learning-teaching teams, independent study, etc) to share responsibility in the process of mutual inquiry.
The learning process is related to and makes use of the experience of the learners.	12. The teacher helps the students exploit their own experiences as resources for learning through the use of such techniques as discussion, role playing, case method, etc. 13. The teacher gears the presentation of his own resources to the levels of experience of his particular students. 14. The teacher helps the students to apply new learning to their experience, and thus to make the learning more meaningful and integrated.
The learners have a sense of progress towards their goals.	15. The teacher involves the students in developing mutually acceptable criteria and methods for measuring progress toward the learning objectives. 16. The teacher helps the students develop and apply procedures for self-evaluation according to these criteria.

(From Knowles, 1984, pp83-85)

The diagnostic process can be relatively straightforward, in this writer's experience,

when the need for learning and change is self-evident and the means for achieving it – in terms of skill or knowledge acquisition is clear. But what about the times when the need or the means are not clear or easy?

In re-reading Knowles for the purpose of this thesis, the writer was struck by two of his statements in particular.

Adults, he asserts, have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept, they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. Yet the minute they walk into an activity labelled "education" or "training", they are apt to "put on" their dunce hats of dependency, fold their arms, sit back, and say, "Teach me" (Knowles, 1984, p56).

Adults, he believes, become ready to learn those things they need to know, and will generally become ready to learn when faced with developmental tasks that genuinely stretch the individual's existing repertoire of skills and knowledge. "It is not necessary to sit by passively and wait for readiness to develop naturally, however. There are ways to induce readiness through exposure to models of superior performance, career counselling, simulation exercises, and other techniques" (Knowles, 1984, p59).

<u>But what if they are not ready</u>?

When this writer's praxis is most truly stretched, it is precisely when the learner's self-concept does not open up the possibilities for change (either self-directed or directed by others), when they are not in a state of readiness, despite the "messages" being given by the world around them, when they are fearful of change, and when there are the kind of "blind spots" that lead people to say, "I have nothing to learn," or, "I don't know what I don't know", or, "I am already skilled enough."

This might sound like a description of a person who is "stuck", or "dependent" or "complacent". This writer would contend that that is potentially a description of any one of us, when asked to operate in third position, to engage in the kind of reflection that is a pre-requisite for "double-loop" learning, when the very assumptions or foundations on which our behaviour or thinking rests are being called into question.

It is at this point that one starts to ask very serious questions of the literature on adult learning – not only of the work of Knowles, but also of those who have followed him. There have been many stimulating – and for this writer – tantalising ideas and techniques offered, but arguably each one of them, when used to tackle the more complex – but potentially most important – areas of learning is seriously tested by some very fundamental aspects of what for want of a better word, might be called our "human condition". Those aspects of ourselves that make it difficult for us to attain "critical subjectivity" about ourselves, to see ourselves from a different perspective, to see ourselves as others see us. Even when we want to, when we are committed to doing it, it is not necessarily easy to have that kind of insight or to "stay with it" long enough to effect sustained behavioural change.

In Chapter 4, the writer mentions that – in collaboration with a colleague – she came to use the concept of "personal scripts". Her working definition of these, as offered to her clients and students, is as follows:

> *Personal scripts are characteristic behaviours which are so much a part of us that, like our skin, we are unaware of them for much of the time; some of our scripts may not be in our awareness at all; nonetheless, they powerfully affect the way we use our skills, engage with others, and understand and think about ourselves and our world.*
>
> *Because we are often unaware of them, they can have powerful – but uncalibrated or uncontrolled – effects on others. In this respect, they can operate like "boomerangs" – things we throw but are unaware of throwing, even when they come back some time later (be it seconds or years later) and hit us on the head; at which point we often ask, "Where the hell did that come from?"*

Personal scripts will, of necessity, be brought into play when one is engaged in any act of learning.

This concept of scripts was developed in a fairly pragmatic way. The writer and her colleague had been studying systems thinking as expounded in Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline* and had been trying to engage with the concept of system archetypes: the deep generative structures which underly the surface pattern of events (often seemingly isolated and unrelated) observed in organisations. Having explored the concept in organisational terms, and decided that "scripts" would be an easier term for clients to accept and understand than "archetypes", it seemed a simple leap to apply the same term to the generative structures which potentially account for much of human behaviour, provided one does not take a rigidly behaviourist view of the human psyche.

The term "scripts" has, of course, been used by others, although that was not in the writer's conscious awareness at the time. For example, Abelson (1981) has explored the psychological status of the script, and Gioia and Poole (1984) have examined the scripts at work in organisational behaviour.

In the sense that the present writer uses it, it is a very broad umbrella term for a whole range of things which potentially "drive" human behaviour from the "inside".

Examples of personal scripts include entrenched habits, unconscious highly skilled behaviour, Argyris and Schon's (1978) "implicit theories" and "theories-in-use", Argyris' (1985) notion of "skilled incompetence" and "defensive routines", Senge's (1990) "mental models" (assumptions, templates, concepts through which we filter and construct reality), the concept of preference (as represented, for example, in the MBTI framework, Myers 1962), learned styles (for example Mumford, 1987), enduring needs and motivations, and the dynamics of personality. As Senge (1990) observes, the more efficient a model of the world – or a script for dealing with it – turns out to be, the more

transparent or invisible it becomes to its owner. Chapter 4 offers an illustration of one of the writer's own personal scripts in action (see "Dominic").

In this writer's thinking, teams might have a "team script" just as organisations (or large sub-sets of them) might have organisational scripts.

The notion of "scripts" is part of this writer's own reflective "theorising" – an attempt to make a higher order level of sense out of her experience and to provide an explanation for that experience. It is introduced here because it is when she evaluates techniques "on offer" from the adult learning literature, she is setting them against the yardstick: "Will they help the processes of reflection which are needed to surface and modify personal scripts, so that double-loop learning can occur?"

Peter Senge's work (1990 and 1994) offers us a number of ideas about how to develop the skills he believes are critical for contemporary organisations and individuals: those skills being the capacity to deal with complexity, creative orientation and reflective dialogue. His five "disciplines" include systemic thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning. Three of these are particularly pertinent in the context of the present discussion.

Personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of developing patience and seeing reality objectively. *Mental models* involves exploring ingrained assumptions, looking inside ourselves and making our own thinking open to the influence of others. This discipline applies to teams and organisations as well as to individuals. *Team learning* involves creating the quality of dialogue and reflection in which all the other disciplines can be practised. It involves inquiry, rather than advocacy, as well as high levels of listening and mutual respect.

Although an inspiring work for many, for others the work of Senge and other writers

leaves a great deal to be desired. Here is Garvin's (1993) reaction:

> Sound idyllic? Absolutely. Desirable? Without question. But does it provide a framework for action? Hardly. The recommendations are far too abstract and too many questions remain unanswered. How, for example, will managers know when their companies become learning organisations? What concrete changes in behaviour are required? What policies and paradigms must be in place? How do you get from here to there?

Most discussions of learning organisations finesse these issues. Their focus is high philosophy and grand themes, sweeping metaphors rather than the gritty details of practice (Garvin, 1993, p79).

Writing in the Harvard Business Review, Garvin probably speaks for many others. Anecdotal though it may be, this writer's whole experience and effort over the past seven years – indeed, the production of this thesis – has been driven by the need to find practical ways to operationalise the "high philosophy" and "sweeping metaphors".

Garvin's own solution appears to be to resort to the methodologies inspired by the quality movement and its associated practices of continuous improvement (Demming, 1982). These include systematic problem-solving (relying on Demming's scientific method – the "Plan, Do, Check, Act" cycle – which is very similar in practice to the action learning cycle described in Chapter 2, p38; insisting on data rather than assumptions; and using simple statistical tools); systematic experimentation; learning from experience; learning from others; and transferring knowledge.

These are all excellent tools, as their "take-up rate" in both Japan, and increasingly in the Western world attests. It would be foolish for anyone – including this writer – to simply dismiss them as "not good enough". Clearly, these are powerful tools for enabling organisations, teams and individuals to significantly enhance their products, services and practices. To this writer, however, it seems that they do not, in and of themselves, guarantee a shift in the personal scripts of the individual actors involved.

They might create all the right conditions for that to happen, but, as the saying goes, one can lead a horse to water, but have difficulty making it drink.

This perception of the writer is based on her experience, over many years – but most particularly in the last seven – in trying to help people review and if necessary, enrich, extend or modify their "scripted" behaviour. Senge (1990) at one point describes to us the "ladder of inference" – a method for helping to surface and test the assumptions which are bound up in people's mental models – and invites us to gently lead people up and down this ladder. De Gues (1988, p74) asserts that "institutional learning begins with the calibration of existing mental models." In this writer's view, these statements are "magnificent one-liners" but devilishly difficult to practice – and for good reasons, some of which are discussed in what follows.

The emotional cost of learning

Robin Snell (1988, 1989), among others (for example Burgoyne, 1976, Mumford, 1980, Kolb, 1984 and McCall et al, 1988) has researched on-the-job managerial learning and development. He suggests that the majority of such learning is triggered for managers not by them deliberately searching out problems and learning opportunities, but as a response to problems or situations thrust upon them by others. He was struck by the levels of what he calls "distress" embodied in managers' learning practices – and he defines distress as "mental pain, severe pressure of want or danger or fatigue" (Snell, 1989, p23). Common triggers for learning include negative feedback, "big mistakes", being overstretched, being under threat, impasse, injustice, losing out, being on the receiving end of poor role modelling and being under personal attack. As Snell points out, these are not the only things that trigger learning and the alternatives can be very positive and pleasant experiences – such as learning from others, being presented with challenging but essentially enjoyable tasks. Some individuals display high levels of what he calls "natural curiosity", actively seeking out new experiences and seeing

almost every experience – new or not – as an opportunity for learning.

Nonetheless, Snell's over-riding conclusion was that the managers researched "had not used the full range of possible learning patterns and had undergone unnecessary pain and discomfort in their learning ... the implications are that managers need help in combining productivity, elegance and opportunism in their choice and use of learning patterns" (Snell, 1985, p322).

Apart from anything else, Snell suggests that managers should be taught to turn "hard knocks" to advantage, so that such experiences are the trigger for positive rather than negative learning and experience. He also believes that a small amount of planned uncertainty and discomfort, here and now, could yield crucial learning and spare much unexpected pain at a later date. Along with Honey (1989), he advocates that managers need to be taught to be opportunistic learners, to learn when they can, not when they must.

Snell's work makes very interesting reading when put side by side with that of Knowles cited earlier. The reality of adult learning, and what seems to trigger it in practice, appears to be complex in ways that are not directly acknowledged in Knowles' work.

If one has even idly dipped into some of the massive literature which has accumulated on the subject of leading and managing change in organisations, one would recognise some of the issues which Snell raises when discussing managerial learning. Indeed, the message of that literature is so powerful, that it has led a number of Australian commentators to observe that the single biggest leadership challenge facing organisations today is how to make change a trigger to positive learning and development at all levels of the organisation, instead of the beginning of widespread anxiety, resistance and cynicism (see, for example, Dunphy & Stace, 1990).

In a later article, Snell (1990) describes a number of what he calls "psychological-cultural" blockages to learning and some that he describes as "structural" blockages. These correlate well with the present writer's concepts of personal and organisational scripts, respectively.

Psychological-cultural blocks he sees as being resistances within the person which are also rooted in the systems of values and beliefs within groups and societies. One such blockage is a *failure to learn from "hard knocks"*, resulting in the person sinking into psychological withdrawal, burnout, cynicism or chronic disillusionment, drawing on bad feelings rather than focussing on improvement. People experiencing the blockage may put all their energies into blame and desire for retribution, or cling obsessively to old plans, ignoring their own feelings and those of others.

Another barrier is *"fear of perturbation"* (Snell, 1990, p18). Opening out to perturbation requires one to accept the risks attached to confusion and self-discovery. Harrison (1962) suggests that while we all may have a "need to know", we also adopt defence mechanisms to maintain stability in our lifestyles and relationships. Casey (1987) suggests that the prospect of self-discovery is frightening to many managers who have coped for years by denying areas of ignorance or incompetence. Snell, (1990, p18) remarks:

> My hunch is that the strongest defences stem from *bitter* experiences. The prospect of learning through "live" experience is daunting because we are most aware of the need for experiential learning when we face threat or adversity; confusion is associated with set-backs and worry rather than with excitement, and self-discovery with horrific bad news about oneself. I see a parallel between emotional blockage to experiential learning opportunities and the way formal learning occasions have for some managers become associated with distressing memories of sarcasm, boredom and intimidation in the school classroom.

Obsession with short term results and an unwillingness to take time out for adventure and reflection can be a significant barrier. In organisations fixated on results achieved

in short time spans – which could be most organisations – being "open to perturbation" can seem like a waste of valuable time which would be better spent in delivering on the bottom line. Goss et al (1993) among others notes the "doing trap" – the sense that many organisations and individuals have that if they are not engaged in continual activity, they are not working: taking time out to sit and think or read, while revered in Japan, would be seen as "opting out" or "resting" in Australia. The "doing trap" can result in a situation where the individual or organisation does the same thing over and over again, but expects different results. When engaged in frantic activity, it can be difficult to accept that if you want a different result, you will have to do something different.

It has certainly been the recurring experience of this writer that getting people to take time out to reflect on what they are doing, why they are doing it and how they might do it differently or better, even though a seemingly task-related activity is often a major challenge in itself. Getting them to reflect systematically on *themselves* is that much harder.

Lack of an appropriate world-view is another barrier, according to Snell. "Freebie learning opportunities are legion", he suggests,

> but taking them demands at least a recognition that it is worth paying attention to the special concerns of other people, and ideally a combination of independence of mind and curiosity about and respect for other people... It entails a "worldview" that ... brings with it an awareness of multiple ways of perceiving, valuing and acting in social settings ... and ... delights in paradox, ambiguity and the exploration of differences in order to resolve complex and disparate social, political or aesthetic problems (Snell, 1990, p19).

Snell (1990), Honey (1989), Fisher et al (1987) and Argyris (1982, 1990) have all reported pessimism about this. The findings of Fisher et al suggest that on top of a reluctance to open out to perturbation, many managers make scant use of the free learning opportunities that greet them day-to-day. Argyris has regularly argued that

nearly every organisational context induces distorted information, reinforces mistrust and deception and encourages games of coercion, resistance, protection and attack.

Argyris (1990) has explored some of the structural barriers that seem to limit the capacity of individuals and teams to process information. He describes the tendencies – aggravated even more by the pyramidal and authoritarian structure of most organisations above a certain size – to engage in games of covering up, working to rule, control and self-defence. Such covering up is endemic, he believes, and in order to prevent embarrassment or threat, covering-up the cover-up becomes a well-practised skill, resulting in the existence of "undiscussables" and high levels of self-deception. He suggests that even highly-educated professionals engage in what he calls organisational defensive routines to preserve their status and abiding sense of security.

Argyris advocates "Model II" learning, which invites people to deal with incongruence, inconsistency, lack of clarity and ambiguity by confronting them constructively. He concludes, however, that this requires that people learn new ways of collaborative learning and is pessimistic about this happening as long as competitive win-lose, low-risk-taking interactions are rewarded and co-operative problem-solving high-risk-taking interventions are suppressed.

Martin (1993) writes in similar vein, describing how people, in searching for the source of problems, often want to look outside themselves, and often outside the company, blaming the stupidity of the customer or client, the vagueness of strategic goals, or the unpredictability of the environment.

In Martin's view, however, organisations defend against change not because they are just like insecure individuals, but because they are made up of individuals (many of whom might also be insecure!) who are working at what has always worked. And organisations' practices (one aspect of their "scripts") may provide a powerful context

for inertia. To understand and break out of that inertia, they must be capable of "third position" thinking at an organisational level, to be able to understand their own life story, how they got to be where they are, and what "where they are" truly looks like.

Martin goes on to describe how the articulation of a founder's vision, the consolidation of steering and control mechanisms, the deterioration in necessary feedback and the proliferation of organisational defensive routines, all combine to provide what Snell (1990) calls structural barriers to reflection on why they have come to act the way they do.

> Why is this? (Martin asks, 1993, p83). Because people are not at their best when faced with a largely uncertain future. Traumatised by past events, they determine never, never to make the same mistake again – and wind up mistaking the old crisis for the new one. They fear for their jobs or even for the jobs of the people who have been counting on their judgement. They fear their bosses or their boards. They avert their eyes from quantitative evidence contradicting their expectation. They snap at people who give voice to their repressed doubts. They demonise the competition, scoff at customers, infantilise themselves, and parentalise the CEO ... corruption begins when people start saying one thing and thinking another.

None of this is good news for those who must live successfully in the age of discontinuity. Is there anything to be done about it? Some of the suggestions offered in the literature are explored in the last part of this chapter.

Reflection-in-action: a "kind of knowing"

The previous discussion has highlighted some of the challenges associated with learning and the reflection that makes up one of the tools of learning. Arguably, however, the kind of reflection that leads to insight and learning is made difficult by another aspect of the human condition. This is the issue described so helpfully – for this writer, at any rate – by Schon (1987) in his book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*.

In the Preface to this book, Schon remarks that the book attempts, among other things, to answer the question: "What kind of professional education would be appropriate to an epistemology of practice based on reflection-in-action?" He suggests that:

> university-based professional schools should learn from such deviant traditions of education practice as studies of art and design, conservatories of music and dance, athletics coaching, and apprenticeship in the crafts, all of which emphasise coaching and learning by doing. Professional education should be redesigned to combine the teaching of applied science with coaching in the artistry of reflection-in-action... The generalised educational setting, derived from the design studio, is a *reflective practicum*. Here students mainly learn by doing, with the help of coaching. Their practicum is "reflective" in two senses: it is intended to help students become proficient in a kind of reflection-in-action; and, when it works well, it involves a dialogue of coach and student that takes the form of reciprocal reflection-in-action (Schon, 1987, pxii).

A major point of departure for Schon is the observation that:

> in the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of the situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern (Schon, 1987, p3).

Such messy, problematic situations arise when the task or issue falls outside the categories of existing theory and technique, when there are serious conflicts among the values that are being brought to bear on the situation, or when there are varying multi-disciplinary perspectives available to us. These indeterminate zones of practice – characterised by uncertainty, uniqueness, conflict and confusion – sit apart from the canons of technical rationality. Yet, in an age of discontinuity, arguably these are precisely the sorts of situations which become central to professional – and certainly managerial – practice. Schon argues that this has resulted in some crises of confidence – both with respect to the confidence that society has in some of its most time-honoured professions, such as medicine and the law, and with respect to the professional schools that have produced these practitioners.

He suggests that one solution is to reverse the traditional relationship between education and competent practice. Instead of making the assumption that competent practice is drawn from the "high ground" of professional educational preparation, he invites us to ask what we can learn from a careful examination of artistry – that is, the competence by which practitioners actually handle indeterminate zones of practice.

Artistry he defines as:

> an exercise of intelligence, a kind of knowing, though different in crucial respects from a standard model of professional knowledge. It is not inherently mysterious; it is rigorous in its own terms; and we can learn a great deal about it ... by carefully studying the performance of unusually competent performers.

Schon uses the term professional artistry to refer to the kinds of competence practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain and conflicted situations of practice. He observes, however, that their artistry is a high-powered, esoteric variant of the more familiar sort of competence all of us exhibit every day in countless acts of recognition, judgement and skilled performance.

What is striking about both kinds of competence is that they do not depend on our being able to describe what we know how to do, or even to entertain in conscious thought the knowledge our actions reveal. We know the "feel of things" – the feel of "hitting the ball right", and we can readily detect when something is wrong, but it is often easier for us to describe deviations from "normal" performance or experience than it is to describe the norm itself. Schon uses the term "knowing-in-action" to describe spontaneous skilful performance which we are unable to make verbally explicit.

Ultimately, Schon's line of thinking poses to us some very interesting questions: What forms does learning – and reflective learning – take when neither learner nor coach can readily articulate in words either that current state of "knowingness" or competence and

what it consists of (in other words, the whole range of mental models, habits and unconscious skills and other personal scripts that sit behind it), or what is involved in developing it, enriching it or sharing it?

If reflection is about sense-making, how can sense-making happen when words don't come easily and concepts are difficult to articulate? What are the forms of communication available to coach and student under these circumstances? On what factors does effective communication depend? In the design studio, when both coach and student are working as practitioners, what will their interaction be like? What will help and hinder it?

Schon himself suggests that skilled practitioners often effect learning tacitly through what he calls "reflection-in-action". The process as he describes it is very similar to the action-learning cycle described in Chapter 2. We begin by bringing to a situation spontaneous, routinized responses ("first position" behaviour in the terms of the writer), which produces an unexpected outcome – a "surprise", whether pleasant or unpleasant – that does not fit the categories of our knowing-in-action. Surprise leads to reflection within an action-present ("second position" behaviour) in which we ask ourselves, "What's happened? What do I need to do differently?" Reflection then triggers "on-the-spot" experimentation which leads to adjustment of the behaviour. This whole process might occur very quickly, appear very skilled to an independent observer, and might not be articulated at a conscious level by the person involved (in other words, there might be no "third position" reflection at all). It is epitomised by the skilled improvisation displayed by jazz musicians or dancers, who must "feel" where the music or steps are going, rather than "thinking it through".

These ideas of Schon pose an entirely different set of challenges for those who wish to use reflection to facilitate their own learning or the learning of others. What happens when we don't have the words to say it?

Nonaka (1991) has come at this question from an organisation perspective – and the perspective of organisations whose need in the information age is for "knowledge-creating".

He suggests that creating and implementing new knowledge (that is, innovating) is not simply a matter of "processing" objective information – that it depends, rather, on tapping the tacit and often highly subjective insights, intuitions and hunches of individuals, and making those insights available for learning and use by the company as a whole. This will not happen, he suggests, without personal commitment and trust, based on shared understanding and accurate collective insight into what the organisation stands for, where it is going, what kind of world it wants to live in, and how to make that world a reality. It also implies the commitment and energy to go on re-creating and renewing the organisation and everyone in it.

In this process, tacit knowledge and understanding needs to be made explicit, in order to be shared and for innovation to happen. Explicit knowledge is formal and systematic, can be communicated in product specifications or a scientific formula or a computer program.

But as Nonaka points out, the tacit knowledge that is the source of innovation can be highly personal, hard to formulate. In the words of the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1958), we know more than we can tell.

> Tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in action and in an individual's commitment to a specific context – a craft or profession, a particular technology or product market, or the activities of a work group or team. Tacit knowledge consists partly of technical skills – the kind of informal, hard-to-pin-down skills captured in the term "know how". A master craftsman after years of experience develops a wealth of expertise "at his fingertips". But he is often unable to articulate the

> scientific or technical principles behind what he knows. At the same time, tacit knowledge has an important cognitive dimension. It consists of mental models, beliefs and perspectives so ingrained that we take them for granted, and therefore cannot easily articulate them (Nonaka, 1991, p98).

Nonaka goes on to suggest four basic patterns for creating knowledge or learning in any organisation:

- from tacit to tacit (through observation, imitation and practice, as in "apprenticeship"); in this pattern, neither the apprentice nor the master gains any systematic (i.e. shareable) insight into their craft knowledge and so it cannot easily be leveraged by the organisation as a whole;

- from explicit to explicit (collecting, combining and synthesising many existing pieces of explicit knowledge from different parts of the organisation); this combination does not really extend the organisation's knowledge base, although it might make it more accessible to more likely to be used;

- from tacit to explicit (the conversion of local knowledge into explicit knowledge that can be accessed, used and enhanced by others);

- from explicit to tacit (the internalisation of knowledge by others, so that their own "artistry", to use Schon's term, is broadened, extended and reframed).

These four patterns of learning are vital for the knowledge-creating company, but they all depend on being able, at some point, to articulate that knowledge.

Nonaka acknowledges that this means finding ways to "express the unexpressible" and he makes some suggestions about how that might be done. He points to what he regards as one of the most frequently overlooked management tools: the store of

figurative language and symbolism that managers can draw from to articulate their intuitions and insights. He says that this evocative and sometimes highly poetic knowledge figures very prominently in product development in certain Japanese companies.

One kind of figurative language that he sees as being especially important is metaphor.

> By metaphor, I don't just mean a grammatical structure or allegorical expression. Rather, metaphor is a distinctive method of perception. It is a way for individuals grounded in different contexts and with different experiences to understand something intuitively through the use of imagination and symbols without the need for analysis or generalisation. Through metaphor, people put together that they know in new ways and begin to express what they know and cannot yet say (Nonaka, 1991, p100).

Metaphors not only start the dialogue, but by establishing a connection between two things that seem only distantly related, metaphors set up a discrepancy or conflict, suggest multiple meanings and thus can carry dialogue into truly creative effort.

Schon (1987) offers us a number of suggestions as to what forms reflection might take when the knowledge or skill being developed is initially – or even mainly – tacit. His suggestions flow from using the models of the design studio (as in architecture) and the master class (as in drama or music).

The coach, for example, observes as the student makes a "local" experiment (that is, dealing with some small component of the whole task), and then asks the student to observe the effect of what they have done; the coach might then "re-frame" the problem, by asking the student to view the local experiment in the context of the whole, inviting attention to oscillate between the whole and the unit; experimentation itself might lead, eventually, to a re-framing of the whole.

But what happens when the current situation – brought to light by the student's task or

efforts – is unique? How does the skilled coach-practitioner make use of his/her accumulated experience? When familiar categories of theory or technique cannot be applied, how is prior experience brought to bear on the invention of new frames, theories and categories of action?

Schon's suggestion is in some respects like the technique suggested by Nonaka: the skilled practitioner has, in fact, built up a repertoire of examples, images, understandings and actions, and he or she uses one or more of these – not as templates for the unfamiliar situation which confronts them now; they cannot be templates since they are essentially different from what is at hand – but rather as metaphors. By treating the current unfamiliar situation as if it were something else, the practitioner opens up possibilities for dealing with it.

Both coach and students are assisted in dealing with the unfamiliar if they engage in what Schon calls "rigorous experimentation" – being fully open to the evidence which the experiment produces, be it failure or success. The coach must also have the ability to construct and manipulate "virtual worlds" for the purposes of experimentation – these constructed worlds are a representation of the real world of practice.

Schon's entire work was very stimulating to this writer – as has been acknowledged already. However, it has to be said that his writings are more suggestive than prescriptive, and the book could not in any sense of the word be described as a "how-to" manual. That is very much in keeping with his subject matter. The master craftsman can suggest and indicate, can supply metaphors and possibilities, but at the end of the day, the development of complex practice is in the hands of the practitioner herself. In Chapters 4 and 5, the writer will describe the way in which her own practice was developing in parallel with the development of her understanding, and how the two were finally integrated in her own praxis.

Applications to the development of praxis

Accepting that reality, Schon's writing was not only helpful to the present writer in exploring the nature of reflection, but also in understanding the science of praxeology – or the theory of practice. She will return to that theme in the next chapter. However, the challenge of the development of skilled practice is nicely illustrated in Schon's account of the "paradox of learning to design". This account is quoted at length, because Schon's own words seem to this writer to be more helpful than her own "translation" could be at this point.

> Initially, the student does not and cannot understand what designing means. He finds the artistry of thinking like an architect to be elusive, obscure, alien, and mysterious. Moreover, even if he were able to give a plausible verbal description of designing – to intellectualise about it – he would still be unable to meet the requirement that he demonstrate an understanding of designing *in the doing*.
>
> From his observation of the students' performance, the studio master realises that they do not at first understand the essential things. He sees, further, that he cannot explain these things with any hope of being understood, at least at the outset, because they can be grasped only through the experience of actual designing. Indeed, many studio masters believe, along with Leftwich, that there are essential "covert things" that can never be explained; either the student gets them in the doing, or he does not get them at all. Hence the Kafkaesque situation in which the student must "hang on to the inflection of the tone of voice ... to discover if something is really wrong."
>
> The design studio shares in a general paradox attendant on the teaching and learning of any really new competence or understanding: for the student seeks to learn things whose meaning and importance she cannot grasp ahead of time. She is caught in the paradox Plato describes so vividly in his dialogue the *Meno*. There, just as Socrates induces Meno to admit that he hasn't the least idea what virtue is, Meno bursts out with this question:
>
> > But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know? (Plato, 1956, p128).
>
> Like Meno, the design student knows she needs to look for something but does not know what the something is. She seeks to learn it, moreover, in the sense of coming to know it *in action*. Yet, at the beginning, she can neither do it nor recognise it when she sees it. Hence, she is caught up in a self-contradiction:

> "looking for something" implies a capacity to recognise the thing one looks for, but the student lacks at first the capacity to recognise the object of her search. The instructor is caught up in the same paradox: he cannot tell the student what she needs to know, even if he has words for it, because the student would not at that point understand him.
>
> The logical paradox of the *Meno* accurately describes the experience of learning to design. It captures the very feelings of mystery, confusion, frustration, and futility that many students experience in their early months or years of architectural study. Yet most students do attempt to carry out the paradoxical task.
>
> The student discovers that she is expected to learn, by doing, both what designing is and how to do it. The studio seems to rest on the assumption that it is only in this way that she can learn. Others may help her, but they can do so only as she begins to understand for herself the process she finds initially mysterious. And although they may help her, *she* is the essential self-educator. In this respect, the studio tradition of design education is consistent with an older and broader tradition of educational thought and practice, according to which the most important things – artistry, wisdom, virtue – can only be learned for oneself (Schon, 1987, pp82-84).

This is perhaps a hard message given the urgency expressed by Nonaka (cited earlier) for ways of speeding up and making more effective the transfer and creation of knowledge.

It was a hard lesson for the writer, who had hoped against all hope that there were some "quick ways" to effect high level reflection, to get to "third position" and stay there for long enough – or regularly enough – to generate significant shifts in understanding and practice. As Schon so astutely observes, however, there are some things that one can only learn for oneself, and Chapter 4 recounts how this writer had to learn that particular lesson for herself.

None of this means, of course, that the facilitator is irrelevant and can do nothing to enhance the quality of learning, including reflective learning. Nor does it mean that there are not ways of working with oneself to enhance one's own learning and reflective capabilities. It does suggest, however, that the behaviours to be used are much more subtle and much more complex than a glance at much of the literature on the learning

organisation would suggest.

And it is fitting that it should be so. As human beings are "infinite in their variety" (to misquote Shakespeare), their behaviour and the tasks they set for themselves both inside and outside of occupational settings are only as limited as the human imagination itself. Management is certainly a field that warrants Schon's description of the mess and confusion in the "swampy lowland". As Livingstone (1970, p101) observed:

> Management is a highly individual art. What style works well for one manager in a particular situation may not produce the desired results for another manager in a similar situation, or even for the same manager in a different situation. There is no one best way for all managers to manage in all situations. Every manager must discover for himself, therefore, what works and what does not work for him in different situations. He cannot become effective merely by adopting the practices or the managerial style of someone else. He must develop his own natural style and follow practices that are consistent with his own personality.
>
> Livingstone goes on to suggest that all managers need to learn that, in order to be successful, they must manage in a way that is consistent with their unique personalities. Managers who adopt artificial styles or follow practices that are not consistent with their own personalities are likely not only to be distrusted by others, but to be ineffective. He quotes Ghiselli's (1969) studies of managerial talent which suggested that people who display the greatest individuality in managerial behaviour are generally the ones judged to be the real managers.

Livingstone observes that managers are rarely taught how to manage in ways that are consistent with their own personalities. Rather, in many formal education and training programs, they are taught to follow a prescribed set of practices in order to get the highest productivity, lowest costs and best performance.

If, however, an organisation wants growth in the deepest sense, then one must agree with Brouwer (1964), that something more subtle and more basic in its impact is called for in the management development effort. Such deeper growth may entail a change in self-concept – certainly in self-understanding. The manager who once was unreliable in his or her judgement, or who lacked drive grows toward reliability in judgement or

towards stronger drive.

> Growth in this sense brings observable changes in outward behaviour, because each person is now inwardly different – different, for example, in his perception of himself, in his attitude toward his job and his company as both relate to his own life, or his feeling of responsibility for others.
>
> But experience shows that such growth is as difficult to achieve as it is desirable. It demands the full-fledged participation of the manager... He does not change because he is told to, exhorted to, or because it is the thing to do.
>
> Such growth implies changes in the man himself – in how he uses his knowledge, in the ends to which he applies his skills, and, in short, in his view of himself. The point is clear that the growing person examines himself; and as he does do, he emerges with new depths of motivation, a sharper sense of direction, and a more vital awareness of how he wants to live on the job. Growth in this sense is personalised and vital. And such growth in self-concept is at the heart of a real manager development effort (Brouwer, 1964, p38).

Accepting the complexity and individuality of the individual, and accepting the challenges that poses for the practitioner in the field of learning, nonetheless, that practitioner must soldier on, attempting to craft a praxis that is fit for the task.

This did not mean, among other things, abandoning the literature, or deciding that the experience reflected in it counts for nothing. Quite the reverse! If anything this writer re-doubled her efforts to make constructive use of the available literature. But, hopefully, she became more discerning in her use of it, and eventually (as Chapter 5 describes) found her way back through the literature to the books and wisdom which had been offered to her when she was still an apprentice, learning the craft of counselling.

In the final section of this chapter, however, the writer continues to draw on other literature on learning which has been helpful in framing her own praxis – her own combination of theory and practice.

Other lessons from the literature

The reading of Schon's work, which has already been so extensively quoted here, continued to be remarkably suggestive of the sorts of things that would be helpful for this writer in her own practice. For example, in describing the way that good coaches are able to make helpful connections between previous experiences and unfamiliar ones, using previous experience as metaphors, rather than templates, Schon makes the point that the richer the range of the coach's experience, the richer and more complete the range of metaphors that can be offered. The capacity to intuitively tap into one's own experience, seeking out the images and metaphors that will make most sense, is clearly a helpful asset.

He describes the "ladder of reflection", the first rung of which is the taking of action, the second of which is describing the action, the third reflection or dialogue on the description of the action, and the fourth and highest rung is "reflection on reflection/dialogue on description of the action" (Schon, 1987, p115). This line of thinking sat well with the writer's own formulation of first, second and third position thinking.

The potential pit-falls are highlighted: the student "overlearning" the coach's message, construing it as a set of expert procedures to be followed in each situation; developing a "closed-system vocabulary" in which the student can state the coach's principles while performing in a manner incongruent with them and remaining unaware of that fact; the student becoming a "counter-learner", refusing to suspend disbelief and be open to new ideas.

The use of modelling, demonstration and imitation is discussed by Schon. In fact, both Schon and Knowles (1978) relate a story about Carl Rogers which – as well as illustrating a powerful lesson about the art of modelling – had the even more important

effect, for this writer, of propelling her back to the literature she had been very familiar with while a post-graduate student in psychology, but had totally neglected for well over ten years. That part of the story will be taken up in Chapter 5.

The story – or rather statement – which will be recounted in Roger's (1969, p277) own words, obviously struck a powerful chord with two writers and thinkers who were themselves distinguished in their field. Rogers was presenting some personal reflections on teaching and learning to a group of teachers assembled at Harvard University.

a. My experience has been that I cannot teach another person how to teach. To attempt it is for me, in the long run, futile.

b. It seems to me that anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential and has little or no significant influence on behaviour. That sounds so ridiculous that I can't help but question it at the same time I present it.

c. I realise increasingly that I am only interested in learnings which significantly influence behaviour. Quite possibly this is simply a personal idiosyncrasy.

d. I have come to feel that only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.

e. Such self-discovered learning, truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience, cannot be directly communicated to another. As soon as an individual tries to communicate such experience directly, often with a quite natural enthusiasm, it becomes teaching, and its results are inconsequential. It was some relief recently to discover that Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, has found this, too, in his own experience, and stated it very clearly a century ago. It made it seem less absurd.

f. As a consequence of the above, I realise that I have lost interest in being a teacher.

g. When I try to teach, as I do sometimes, I am appalled by the results, which seem a little more than inconsequential, because sometimes the teaching appears to succeed. When this happens, I find that the results are damaging. It seems to cause the individual to distrust his own experience and to stifle significant learning. Hence I have come to feel that the outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful.

h. When I look back at the results of my past teaching, the real results seem the same – either damage was done, or nothing significant occurred. This is frankly troubling.

i. As a consequence, I realise that I am only interested in being a learner, preferably learning things that matter, that may have some significant influence on my own behaviour.

j. I find it very rewarding to learn, in groups, in relationship with one person as in therapy, or by myself.

k. I find that one of the best, but most difficult, ways for me to learn is to drop my own defensiveness, at least temporarily, and to try to understand the way in which this experience seems and feels to the other person.

l. I find that another way of learning for me is to state my own uncertainties, to try to clarify my puzzlement, and thus get closer to the meaning that my experience actually seems to have.

m. The whole train of experiencing, and the meanings that I have thus far discovered in it, seem to have launched me on a process which is both fascinating and at times a little frightening. It seems to mean letting my experience carry me on, in a direction which appears to be forward, toward that I can but dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current meaning of that experience. The sensation is that of floating with a complex stream of experience, with the fascinating possibility of trying to comprehend its ever-changing reality (Rogers, 1969, p277).

Rogers himself recounts that on the day, his words struck a powerful chord with the assembled teachers, not a particularly positive one, as feelings ran high. He says, "it was a very thought-provoking session. I question whether any participant in that session has ever forgotten it" (Rogers, 1969, p277)

Not only is Rogers, in this statement, saying something very important about what can happen when learners become dependent, and how their facilitators can inadvertently allow that to happen, it contains – for this writer, at least – a very timely reminder about the value of the qualities of authenticity, openness and higher-order listening when in dialogue with others. These were all qualities to which the writer was exposed as a student, which she had read about and had tried to practice. But in reading these words of Rogers, after an absence of so many years, it suddenly became very important to revisit that literature and make sense of it all over again.

It should be acknowledged that Schon stimulated that interest to "revisit" in another way. His book contains a couple of very substantial chapters in which he applies his ideas about the "reflective practitioner" to artistry in the fields of psychoanalytic practice, counselling and consulting. The latter are the fields in which the writer herself practices, and so Schon's insights were, hopefully, going to be of great assistance.

Working with mental models: a particular kind of personal scripting

In fact, Schon relates the experience which he and Chris Argyris had in over fifteen years of working together to develop a theory and practice of competent interpersonal behaviour. They proposed (Argyris & Schon, 1974) that human beings in their interactions with one another *design* their behaviour and hold theories for doing so. These theories of action include the values, strategies and underlying assumptions that inform individuals' patterns of interpersonal behaviour. (The present writer would regard these as being personal scripts.) They distinguished two levels at which theories of action operate: espoused theories that we use to explain or justify our behaviour (for example, the manager who espouses openness and freedom of expression – as in, "my door is always open"); and theories-in-use, which are the tacit, implicit theories expressed in our spontaneous behaviour with others. Like other kinds of "knowing in action", we may be unable to describe them, and we might be surprised to discover that they are actually incongruent with the theories we espouse.

Argyris and Schon have described "theories-in-use" in some organisational settings (especially situations characterised by difficulty or stress) as having "Model I" values or strategies. Some Model I characteristics are set out in Table 3. "Model II", by comparison (see Table 4), has governing variables which include valid information, internal commitment, and free and informed choice. Model II aims at creating open dialogue even about difficult and sensitive matters, subjecting private dilemmas to

shared inquiry and making public tests of negative attributions that Model I keeps private and undiscussable. Model II encourages double-loop learning, in which there is a dialogue about the governing variables and assumptions that underlie behavioural strategies. For example, there might be dialogue about the fact that two people have been colluding to keep from discussing issues that might bring them into open conflict.

Schon relates the experience that he and Argyris had in conducting seminars and workshops at Harvard and MIT. They had offered to their students what Schon calls "Model II heuristics", such as:

- capable advocacy of your position with inquiry into the other's beliefs;

- state the attribution you are making, tell how you got to it, and ask for the other's confirmation or disconfirmation;

- if you experience a dilemma, express it publicly.

As the writer would say, if asked ... "all very rational, very reasonable, but ... !"

Table 3: Characteristics of Model I

Governing Variable for Action	Action Strategies for Actor	Consequences for Actor and His Associates	Consequences for Learning	Effectiveness
Achieve the purposes as I perceive them	Design and manage environment so that actor is in control over factors relevant to me	Actor seen as defensive	Self-sealing	
Maximise winning and minimise losing	Own and control task	Defensive inter-personal and group relation-ships	Single-loop learning	Decreased
Minimise eliciting negative feelings	Unilaterally protect self	Defensive norms	Little public testing of theories	
Be rational and minimise emotionality				

(From Schon, 1987, p257)

Table 4: Characteristics of Model II

Governing Variable for Action	Action Strategies for Actor	Consequences for Actor and His Associates	Consequences for Learning	Effectiveness
Valid information	Design situations or encounters where participants can be origins and experience high personal causation	Actor seen as minimally defensive	Testable processes	
Free and informed choice	Task is controlled jointly	Minimally defensive inter-personal re-lations and group dynamics	Double-loop learning	Increased
Internal commitment to the choice and constant monitoring of the implementation	Protection of self is a joint enterprise, oriented towards growth	Learning-oriented norms	Frequent public testing of theories	
	Bilateral protection of others	High freedom of choice, internal commitment, and risk-taking		

(From Schon, 987, p.259)

Schon then comments that they became aware of a cycle of failure they analysed in the following way:

- when students felt vulnerable to threat, they would produce "automatic intercepts": negative feelings like anger, resentment, fear or impatience would trigger such automatic Model I responses as "blowing up", withdrawal, withholding of information considered dangerous, or projection of anger on to others;

- typically, a student would be at first unaware of the feeling that triggered his or her reaction, and would experience failure;

- even once the feelings were identified, the student would experience dilemma and frustration at not knowing how to accurately and quickly recognise, and

then constructively express the feeling that had triggered the Model I response.

Argyris and Schon realised that to process – and manage – these sorts of feelings and reactions "on-line" under conditions of stress and speed would be asking too much of trainee counsellors (and sometimes of more experienced practitioners as well). They offered their students the following advice:

- do not try to be complete or perfect;

- do not be afraid to correct or modify what you had to say "on-line", after you've thought about it;

- identify the major meanings that you infer from what the person is saying and is expressing through non-verbal language; if you believe your inferences validly represent the other's meanings, go ahead and respond;

- advocate your position as clearly as you can, and combine it with an invitation for challenge and correction;

- do not hesitate to be incomplete, in the sense of expressing only one of several possible positions;

- if you are incomplete, you can say and/or own up to it later.

Although this advice produced some improvements in the rate and quality of learning, they believed that students still somehow hadn't quite got the hang of Model II interventions, having not given up their own Model I behavioural patterns of wanting to maintain control over others, protect themselves and others from confrontation and look to the leader for confirmation and support. They noticed that students hold

unrealistically high expectations of their own performance; saw error as failure, and repeated failure as a blow to self-esteem; were ambivalent toward their instructors, feeling that they (the students) were performing under scrutiny, and yet competing with one another for their instructor's approval; hid their feelings of uncertainty; became defensive under scrutiny.

Schon comments that the concentration on constellations of meanings, feelings and reasonings had surfaced a dilemma about authenticity and control – how *are* genuine feelings to be dealt with in a model that stresses rationality – not in the Model I sense of cool reason which minimises emotional behaviour, but in the sense of being able to acknowledge and then step aside from one's own feelings, to go quickly to "third position" with them? He doesn't actually resolve that particular dilemma, but makes the comment instead that, "a predisposition toward rationality, reflectivity, and cognitive risk-taking seems essential for students and coaches alike when a practicum takes the form of action research in a learning/coaching process" (Schon, 1987, p295).

Finding some limits

At which point, having previously declared her admiration for Schon's writing, the writer feels bound to say that she was extremely disappointed. In reviewing literature, particularly literature which has powerfully affected one's own praxis, it's as well to put one's biases on the table. This writer was aware, in reading that part of Schon's work and subsequently, in reading all of Argyris' published work of a profound feeling of discontent, despite finding the logic of the work very compelling.

One of this writer's own post-graduate students has expressed one aspect of this reaction very aptly:

> Argyris' (1990) treatment of defences is generally at fault... (his) analysis of organisational defences, especially those which become routine defences and involve skilled incompetence, holds an underlying assumption that the defence

> needs to be rectified. This is reflected in the language he uses ... the tone is one of regarding defences as negatives, to be corrected or stripped away (Percy, 1993, p17).

She remarks:

> If defensiveness could always be dealt with so simply, many management consultants and psychologists would be out of work. Defences, by their very nature, are defending what is fragile and easily broken. Defences are a protection even given a genuine commitment to learning. They are not easily detected or owned, either by teams or by individuals. Defences shield the blind spots, the exposure of which is painful and so defended and avoided. Gestalt therapist, Jorge Rosner, taught the importance of "honouring defences" since defences exist for a purpose and that purpose is to be respected (as distinct from the defence itself). The purpose of the defence needs to be understood. This is in contrast to Senge's approach, to treat defences as a signal to weed out why learning is not occurring (Percy, 1993, pp16-17).

Percy was reacting to Senge's remark that:

> defensive routines can become a surprising ally toward building a learning team by providing a signal when learning is not occurring. Most of us know when we are being defensive, even if we cannot fully identify the source or pattern of our defensiveness (Senge, 1990, p256).

The writer can identify with Percy's reaction. Her own sense was that the literature is somewhat "brisk" about the business of double-loop learning and third position reflection – that somehow, these are described as just another job of work that can be done provided people remain calm and rational, and able to engage in "cognitive risk-taking". That ability, it seems to this writer, is precisely what is at issue here. That it is a highly valuable skill is not in question, nor is the fact that is urgently needed. What is in question is what it takes for "ordinary" people to engage in this sort of activity – either individually or collectively.

Her own professional need was – and is – to find ways to create the kind of reflective dialogue in which individuals have the greatest possible chance to engage in an

examination of themselves from "third position" and to experiment with double-loop learning. Sometimes – in the writer's practice – that dialogue occupies an hour, sometimes it goes on at intervals over weeks, months, even – in some cases – years. The writer has had the experience of observing others – and trying herself – to work with the techniques described by Senge, Argyris, Schon and others. She knows, from years of personal experience and observation, that these things are extremely difficult to do, for all the reasons described previously under the headings "The emotional cost of learning" and "The words to say it".

And, as someone trained in the field of counselling psychology, she found herself wondering – despite his apparent admiration for at least some aspects of Rogers' practice, whether Schon – or Argyris, for that matter – had ever explicitly introduced into their practice the concepts of listening, suspended judgement, and personal availability, empathy and openness that so characterise the writings – and by all accounts – the practice of Carl Rogers, or Robert Carkhuff (1960) or Gerard Egan (1988) or any of the other great thinkers and practitioners in the field of helping and human relations.

At no point, that this writer was able to detect, in any of Argyris' books, in *The Reflective Practitioner* (Schon), in *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge), or in the literature that she reviewed on organisational learning was there any guidance or commentary on how these qualities might be helpful in using the techniques they describe. Yet, as Chapter 4 suggests, the most fundamental tenet in this writer's practice is that a failure to listen actively and deeply is at the basis of every dysfunctional or incomplete piece of human dialogue, including that involved in reflection. She found it inconceivable that this would not be important in the kind of dialogue required in the age of discontinuity. And she had great difficulty in believing that this skill is so widely understood and practised that it could be safely taken for granted that every adult knows how to do it, and does it well.

Certainly, there are some writers who do at least acknowledge the importance of these sorts of skills, even though they don't offer much insight into *how* they are used or developed. For example, McGill et al (1992), whose account of large-scale organisational generative learning also was quoted earlier, identified *empathy* as one of the key learning capabilities.

> Managers in learning organisations must be sensitive and concerned for human nature, and be interested in (and capable of) repairing strained relationships... There is no more convincing evidence of empathy than the motivation and means to repair relationships, and no quality more important for learning (McGill et al, 1992, p15).

Martin (1993, p85) comments that, "the key ... is to structure the course of strategic debate in a way that takes into account the dignity and defences of people facing hard choices."

And in fairness to Senge, his treatment of team learning does include references to – though not descriptions of – the importance of suspending assumptions, listening deeply to each other and creating operational trust.

But Edgar Schein (1993), in his commentary on the kind of dialogue required for organisational learning, goes so far as to say that active listening has only a limited role to play in that dialogue. He comments:

> In the typical sensitivity training workshop, we explore relationships through "opening up" and sharing, through giving and receiving feedback, and through examining all of the *emotional* (italics his) problems of communication. In dialogue, however, we explore all the complexities of *thinking and language*. We discover how arbitrary our basic categories of thought and perception are, and, thereby, become conscious of imperfections or bias in our basic *cognitive* processes (Schein, 1993, p43).

This writer found Schein's comments very illuminating, in that he identifies "active

listening" with emotional work and "dialogue" with cognitive work; and in that he appears to believe that cognitive work can proceed independently of emotional involvement.

The perspective so clearly stated by Schein would seem, for this writer, to be implicit in the literature more generally. Although she did not read this comment until relatively late in her thesis work (it was not written until 1993), it explained why she had been disappointed with the organisational learning literature and why, eventually she returned to the counselling literature for guidance in the development of her practice. Her "retreat" to or revisiting of that literature was not solely triggered by her reaction to the learning literature. As mentioned already. she had been trained as a counselling psychologist and knew – she thought – about the qualities of listening, and other characteristics of effective helping behaviour. She thought she had assimilated them into her practice. But she had experiences – to be recounted in the next part of this thesis – that demonstrated to her that her "knowing-in-action" was vastly inferior to her "head knowledge". Her way of dealing with this was to attend – as regularly as possible – to the development of her practice, coupled with a "refresher course" in some of the literature that had once been so familiar.

She went to that literature with purpose. One purpose was to seek guidance to develop her helping – and particularly her listening – skills, because she believed them to be fundamental to her effectiveness in facilitating deep levels of reflection and learning (her own and others'). A second was to help resolve a debate that the learning literature had started in her thinking and practice – the balance in reflective learning between what Casey (1987) has called "love" and "truth", and what Schein would probably call "emotional" and "cognitive" work.

Casey is worth quoting at length:

> Suffering and learning

It is a very old question. Is suffering necessary for learning? I have come to believe that suffering is sometimes necessary and sometimes not. In twelve action learning sets of five or six executives at Ashridge Management College over the past five years, I have watched half a dozen chief executives reach new heights of learning (for them) by crawling painfully through the most daunting jungle of pain and misery. On the other hand, in exactly the same setting I have seen an equal number of chief executives achieve what appeared to be equally significant learning for them, with no real effort – carried along on a light stream of joy and enlightenment, revelling in the sheer delight of their new insights. Learning is sometimes agony and learning is sometimes fun. Is it possible to identify which kind of learning demands suffering and which kind can be fun?

In my teens and twenties I was fortunate to experience at first hand two well tried systems of education – I was at school with the Jesuits and my first job was teaching with the Benedictines for three years. Here are two validated approaches to education, both ancient in their pedigree and accepted across Europe over several centuries. At school I learned through suffering -

To give and not to count the cost,
To fight and not to heed the wounds,
To toil and not to seek for rest,
To labour and to ask for no reward...

Ignatius Loyola founded the Jesuits in 1534 and the grammar school I attended based its education firmly on the principles he established more than 400 years ago, and in its way it worked. There are penalties of course (as with any system) – for example, the weight of guilt and self-denial which all graduates of the Jesuit system carry around for life. But also implanted for life are the joys of intellectual exercise, the springboard of self-discipline, the stimulus of competition, the urge to self-reliance.

Four years later I found myself appointed as a schoolmaster in a Benedictine school. Benedict and Ignatius were poles apart in their thinking about education. Benedict believed in the power of love – not just as we all believe in love – his trust in the power of love was so rock-steady and universal that in his school no place was found for heavy discipline, no corner for punishment, no coercive external force (other than love) was allowed to impinge on the young people being educated.

If survival is any test of a system, then these two diametrically opposed systems of education are both successful – they survive side-by-side today; you can send your son to Stonyhurst ort Ampleforth, exposing him to two very different sets of assumptions regarding what will help him to learn. In one system the assumption is that learning is a relentless fight against our sinful propensity to indolence, in the other system the assumption is that learning is enabled only in an atmosphere of love. McGregor's X and Y come pretty close (Casey, 1987, pp30-31).

He continues:

The Conspiracy of Love with Truth

> So, was Ignatius right or was Benedict right? In a strange way they were both right. Unless the atmosphere is one of trust and love, the chance for self-understanding would never arise, so sets of chief executives need a set adviser able to develop a "Benedictine" environment. But unless the set adviser is also Jesuitical enough to hold on to his belief that the only way to help at the moment of truth is to push the learner through the shell of his own pain, no amount of supportive understanding will really do the trick. This conspiracy of love with truth is a formidable alliance and a potent source of help.
>
> At this stage my conclusion is that (at least in chief executive sets) set advisers not only have the right to abandon process work from time to time and engage in personal therapy; they have the obligation to do so. Because if they do not, nobody else will.
>
> Over the past ten years I have argued that the set adviser's role should be concerned more with group processes than with person-to-person consultancy. I still believe that. What I have learned from my work at Ashridge – and I thank Ashridge for it – is that to be dogmatic about excluding personal consultancy as one part of the set adviser's repertoire is wrong. As with any other skill used by the set adviser, it is simply a question of choosing when to use it (Casey, 1987, p37).

Casey uses the word "love" and a colleague had used a similar word to describe what she did when working with students in learning situations. "You have to love them," she said. This writer knew what she meant – that there is a sense in which it is impossible to work effectively with someone if, in some part of the mind or heart, the helper is judging what is being said or the person saying it. Rogers (1961) called this unconditional positive regard, and it was to Rogers that this writer first turned, seeking some balance to what she perceived to be a gap in the current organisational learning literature. She came out of that excursion – and the journey of practical experience described in the next chapter – with an understanding and a set of techniques which are described in Chapters 5 and 6.

A brief summary of the writer's major learning from this literature

Hopefully, this chapter has not only reviewed some of the literature relevant to the role

of reflection in learning and how it works, but has also revealed how that literature stimulated the present writer's thinking and practice, To summarise the key points around which her own learning focussed, these were:

- The global, organisational and individual significance, in the age of discontinuity, of being able to reflect upon self in the deepest possible ways, even to the extent of re-invention of self through generative, double-loop learning;

- the suggestion that reflection needs to be a process which brings thinking and action close together, that it is something which transcends organisational structures and that it incorporates holistic and intuitive thinking, as well as fact-based logic;

- the andrological theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1984) that emphasises the processes of mutual inquiry and reflection in adult learning;

- the barriers presented by cognitive and emotional "personal scripts" to "critical subjectivity": how "surfacing mental models" (Senge, 1990) constructively opens up new options for personal practice;

- the challenge of working in areas of uncertainty, uniqueness and confusion, in the indeterminate zones of practice;

- Schon's (1987) concept of "artistry": a kind of knowing which is "knowing-in-action" and which can be enhanced by "reflection-in-action";

- Nonaka's (1991) challenge that we make explicit what is tacitly known, and the power of metaphor in doing this;

- the necessity, as Casey (1987) represents it, of accepting the necessity to work in both the emotional and cognitive domains of learning and reflection.

Chapter 4: The development of theory in practice: an account of action learning experience

Introduction

In Chapter 1, the writer described why she was interested in systematically developing her praxis – that is, integrating her personal theory and practice. In brief, the reasons were:

- to acknowledge and clearly articulate why the practitioner does what she does – what drives her to select one technique rather than another in facilitating the development of others;

- to undertake a systematic examination of the gap between the theory or idea which is espoused by the practitioner and the theory-in-use – the actual behaviour which she practises (Argyris & Schon, 1978), with a view to increasing the congruence between the two;

- to throw light on experience which is confusing and on problems which don't seem to have obvious answers and produce what Argyris and Schon (1978) have called "dilemmas of effectiveness";

- to develop practical guides for action, to develop helpful cues to oneself, particularly in difficult situations, that might offer sign posts or at least options as to what to do next;

- to be able to offer something which would be helpful in guiding others who want to do similar things;

- to use experience and practice to refine the practitioner's understanding and personal theory, and to use theory and understanding – her own and other people's – to inform and enrich her practice.

In this study, the practitioner-researcher is the subject of her own research, and has had to try to retain a "critical subjectivity" (Reason, 1988, p12), as she tells and reflects upon the story of the development of one part of her praxis. She offers, in effect, a case-study in the application of self-reflective techniques.

The development of the whole praxis of one individual would be a very big field for study. In the case of the present writer, the development of praxis over the past seven years has included the development of an overall approach to consulting, as well as the development of a whole suite of consulting skills which includes management development, facilitation and conflict resolution skills, counselling, strategic planning, performance management and appraisal.

For the purpose of this study, she focussed on one particular part of her praxis (see below) – albeit one which was – and remains – fundamental to her whole consultancy capability and her capacity to keep developing that capability through learning. It was that part of her praxis concerned with the issues raised in Chapter 1:

- How does reflection help us to learn, or to help others to learn?

- What does reflection consist of? What helps and hinders us in the act of reflection?

- In particular, what are the ingredients in the kind of reflection associated with double-loop learning and third position learning?

- How does reflection help us to develop our understanding of ourselves in ways that help us to learn?

- How do our tacit or implicit "theories" about ourselves guide our behaviour, and does it help to make implicit theories (Argyris & Schon, 1978) explicit?

- How can the practitioner – the educator or facilitator of learning in others – use reflection to understand and develop his or her own practice, with its suite of acknowledged and unacknowledged "theories", and to effectively integrate those themes with practice?

- and how does the researcher tap into, make use of, test and perhaps refine the stock of existing theory and knowledge?

This set of questions, set out in this particular order, more or less matches the sequential development of these ideas in the mind of this writer. It is not a perfect match, because understanding – in this case at any rate – did not progress in "neat" order and there were times when thinking was going on, in parallel, across almost all the issues at once. These were times of "overload" that produced anxiety, excitement and ultimately – insight.

As discussed toward the end of Chapter 2, the writer has chosen to present the data of her experience in the form of a story or narrative, hopefully told in such a manner as to surface the way in which the praxis was developed "in practice". It is intended to reveal both the inner and the outer journey, so that the writer's understanding and invention of herself is as explicit as possible.

The story is divided into two major parts. The first part is primarily the story of the "unplanned experience". The second part is sub-divided into four separate "short"

stories, each one relating the co-operative inquiry and practice entered into with four colleagues. These short stories have been separated out so that they can be told more completely, without "holding up" the development of the rest of the narrative. The writer had a sense that each one was a story in its own right, deserving of being told decently and in order.

In the earlier description of the methodology (Chapter 2) these were categorised as "planned" activities, but the qualification put on that in Chapter 2 needs to be repeated here: there is no way that I could have planned the rich and continuing experience that these people have so generously offered to me.

As a final introductory comment, the writer must point out that she was, in parts of her praxis, "re-invented" by the production of the narrative; that the person who had these experiences has been overlaid, in understanding, by the person who has written about them in her diaries and then in successive drafts of this thesis. Story-telling is an ancient art but its rejuvenating and enriching character remains undiminished.

For the rest of this chapter the personal pronoun is used. As a device for writing, this sets aside the comfortable illusion of objectivity – the experiences are very much the product of a particular person, on a particular journey. However, in using "I", the writer is constantly reminded of the limitations of the individual experience and encouraged to reframe it by asking: "What else could be made of this? Would others have seen it differently or produced different data?"

A brief introduction to the writer

Since this is an account of part of an individual's development over a number of years, it is perhaps helpful to say a little bit about my background since my whole history has undoubtedly shaped my thinking, not just the part of the personal history documented

here.

My professional experience, at the time of writing, includes twenty five years in the fields of occupational psychology, management, consultancy and teaching. My earliest training, as an occupational psychologist in the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) prepared me for counselling, research and organisational analysis using the norms and models of my discipline. These were later extended and reinforced when I undertook a course work Master's degree in Occupational Psychology at Melbourne University in the mid-1970's. I eventually became Chief Psychologist, responsible for a national service of psychologists. The role included not only day-to-day line management, but intellectual leadership, policy development and the management of a complex interface with the rest of the CES and with external bodies.

After ten years in the CES, I took on a consultancy job with the Victorian Public Service Board. This was a complete change and was like "beginning all over again". I was one of an inter-disciplinary team of ten people and for the first time, in any serious and rigorous way, my own understanding of the world, with its psychological orientation, was challenged by that of accountants, economists, management specialists, philosophers, educationalists, engineers, town-planners, lawyers, scientists – and politicians. It felt like undertaking a "crash MBA" in eighteen months.

I emerged from this experience thinking of myself as a generalist, and for quite a few years found little nourishment or excitement in revisiting – or even following – the psychological literature and community.

Four years of consultancy work – in a competitive and challenging environment – had prepared me for another spell of management. In 1982 I moved to Australia Post and spent five years in senior human resource management roles. These jobs combined the development and implementation of strategy – in a very large organisation – with the

executive management of large numbers of people. For the first time, I identified with and became a member of the senior executive group in a large enterprise with a business orientation.

I spent over five years with Australia Post and then, after a short stint with a commercial consulting firm, established my own consultancy practice, covering management development, organisation change, performance management, group facilitation and individual counselling. This practice has been a major part of my professional life for the past seven years (at the time of writing).

For the past twelve years, I have also taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in psychology and management at tertiary institutions in Victoria. From its establishment in 1990 until early 1994, I directed the Master of Business in Management/Organisational Change and Development at RMIT.

Part A: The story of the "unplanned experience"

Introduction

The story of the unplanned experiences follows this sequence:

- my earliest efforts at helping people to make sense of their experiences and guide their actions, which were focussed on what's going on "out there in the world";

- the impact on me of the collegiate group at RMIT who were focussed on self-managed learning; the value of exploring what's going on "inside the person"; and the importance of listening skills in facilitating that exploration;

- my learning about the importance – for both the facilitator and the person being worked with – of being able to cope with the ambiguity and uncertainty that can accompany that inward exploration, when the facilitator relinquishes the role of "expert";

- the learning that I had to do about how to learn from experience by reflecting upon it;

- my efforts at putting these ideas into practice;

- my eventual grasp of the value of story-telling as a means of enhancing reflection on experience;

- my attempt to be "critically subjective" through the use of diary work;

- a specific example of the use of diary work to surface one of my own personal scripts;

- my efforts at reflection-in-the-midst-of-action, and the internal dialogue which accompanies it.

Early efforts

When I began to consult and teach full-time (about 12 months before the commencement of this research), I "followed my nose". I had a range of theoretical models which I used fairly rigorously – or so I thought. I offered my students and my clients – and myself – the comfort that comes from having frameworks which seem to shed light on what is going on and offer some guide to action.

For example, I would offer a model like "systems thinking" (Richardson, 1990) to encourage a client to think broadly about the nature of organisational issues, to see the inter-connectedness of seemingly different phenomena and to highlight the possible – and unexpected – consequences of well-meaning interventions; or perhaps a framework for managing organisational change, like that of Gerard Egan (1988), which systematically itemises the questions to be asked and the issues to be explored.

Without acknowledging it, I was assuming that if people could make sense of issues and experiences, and think systematically and rigorously about them, they could master them. I assumed that a good "head" understanding would be sufficient to explain and guide action. In thinking that way, I was following a practice perfected by the ancient Greeks in application of reason to understanding the nature of the human condition.

I even used a technique which – while lacking his finesse! – probably owes something to Socrates. This consisted of asking people a series of questions which were implicitly designed to draw them to a particular conclusion. Instead of offering them a proposition and asking: "Do you agree with this?" or telling them to apply it, I would encourage them to find the answer for themselves. The point being that I wanted it to be my answer, or a cousin of it.

Most people did not challenge the use of this technique, and it was only on a couple of occasions that someone actually said: "This is frustrating because you only want one answer." I think that I was quite good at listening to – and acknowledging – the answers I didn't want to hear, but I wouldn't stop the process until I got the one I really wanted.

I used these techniques not because the ancient Greeks did it that way, but because it seemed to me to be the obvious way to help people. My own preferred way of dealing

with experiences and issues is by thinking systematically about them and by quickly formulating a series of conclusions or judgements which enable me to take prompt action. In the framework of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1962), I am an extroverted thinker – one who needs dialogue with others to stimulate thinking and sense-making. I knew nothing of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator at the time I am writing of, but I was certainly acting "true to type". And my assumption, at the time, unacknowledged and implicit, was that everyone was like me.

Contact with competencies, action learning and self-managed learning

In taking up the appointment at RMIT (the year in which I began my doctoral work), I encountered a set of ideas and experiences which began to change – quite profoundly – my understanding of what I was doing.

The Department of Management, within the Faculty of Business, had re-shaped its Graduate Diploma in Management. Prideaux and Ford (1988) have given a very complete account of the Department's work in this respect. To use their own words:

> An innovative management development program, involving the support of a background team of fellow workers and the input of a staff member "Consultant", has been created by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and is based around key adult learning principles. These include: emphasis on management competencies, self-management in learning, group-based learning, work experience based training, and relevant career planning (Prideaux & Ford, 1988, p56).

I was very excited by their thinking. The team shared the view expressed much earlier by Mintzberg (1973) that many management schools give students MBA and MPA degrees but do not in fact teach them to manage. Their concern, repeated by various writers in the years since (for example, Simms & Sauser, 1985), was that traditional management education programs did not develop the skills actually required for effective management, concentrating on learning *about* management, but neglecting

learning *how* to manage.

As a result, the RMIT team had become interested to explore not only the knowledge and techniques needed to manage (such as the tools of corporate planning, financial analysis and marketing strategy), but the *competencies* needed for effective managerial performance. I have since worked on my own definition of competencies (Cherry & KcKinnon, 1992) and would describe them now as any combination of skills, personal qualities or attributes which enable a person to sustain effective performance in a particular role. At the time when the RMIT group started working in the field, they drew heavily – though not exclusively – on the work of Boyatzis (1982) – who had examined the management competencies of 2000 American managers and who defined a competency as *an underlying characteristic of a manager causally related to superior performance in a management position* (Boyatzis, 1982).

Boyatzis' study identified eighteen competencies which included such things as proactivity, being concerned with impact, spontaneity, accurate self-assessment, self-control, stamina and adaptability.

As Prideaux (1986) has observed, these were skills and qualities frequently neglected in traditional management education, but potentially the key factors underpinning effective management performance. My interest was immediately caught – could it be that knowledge of models and techniques and the application of reason and logic was not enough?

The reader might well be asking at this point – hadn't fifteen years of practice and six years of study in the field of occupational psychology revealed that to you already? The answer is no, it hadn't.

I knew that when human beings are not performing effectively at work – or in any

given area of their life – then someone has to look "within the person" for the reason – not only at their skills, but at things like their capacity to monitor the impact of their behaviour on others, and at their level of self-confidence.

I had used the skills of the counsellor – active listening, encouragement and empathy (Rogers, 1961) – to help people explore things that were troubling them and blocking performance. In this way, I had – if the Rogerian model is to be believed – helped to build self-esteem and the confidence to go on, but at the end of the day, when the client's or student's heart was lightened and head was clearer, I offered the solutions I knew best – the solutions of logical analysis and pragmatic "common sense". "Just think it through carefully, using this or that model, and take the best available option which that analysis suggests," would be the essence of my advice.

I had studied the landmark contributions of Robert Carkhuff (1969) who had suggested that counsellors should try to share with their clients their own skills – that if one wants to help a person to function more effectively then that person should be trained to actively listen as well as being "actively listened to". Carkhuff's "teaching as a preferred way of helping" and his carefully researched analysis of the skills of effective counselling are to the theory and practice of counselling what Boyatzis is to the field of management development.

Despite years of exposure to that sort of thinking, I did not make the leap of applying it to my own practice as a management educator and consultant. And – like the schools of management education criticised by Mintzberg (1973) – I had not made the leap to thinking that those things should be systematically identified, described and "taught" as part of the process of developing managers. My only consolation – based on subsequent examination of the organisational learning literature – is that I was probably in good company.

There were other attractions for me in the work being done at the RMIT. They were interested in *self-managed* learning – the notion that management development is enhanced when managers themselves take responsibility for diagnosing their own learning needs, choosing ways of meeting these needs and managing the implementation of their development plans. To quote Prideaux again:

> Self-managed approaches to management development appear to achieve strong involvement in learning and high energy directed towards achievement. Intuitively we know that this is the case, but usually management development programs are not designed to release this dynamic. Often the manager is the passive, and sometimes reluctant, recipient of something planned and implemented by someone else (Prideaux, 1986, p46).

The distinction between teaching which is teacher-directed learning (pedagogy) and self-directed learning (andragogy) has been clearly made by Knowles (1978). The concept of andragogy was described in the previous chapter. Where the learner is self-directed, the teacher's role is that of helper, consultant or facilitator, who assists the process of development by the development of "appropriate learning environments and processes" (Prideaux, 1986, p46).

Just what it means in practice to create an appropriate environment and provide appropriate processes became for me the subject of a long search – one which is continuing and which has become the subject of this thesis.

I could embrace the concept of self-managed learning quite readily. After years of giving "expert" advice as a consultant and manager, and accepting fully the responsibility for finding and "selling" the "right" answers to clients, staff and other stakeholders, it was both a relief and a challenge to learn a "new" way.

Again, there was a keen sense of revisiting what I already "knew". The "client-centred" approach to counselling (Rogers, 1961) rejects the notion of counsellor as expert who knows the answers and tells the client what to do. I "knew" that this was

okay in a counselling session and to the extent that I could – before logic and the need to give advice took over – I had tried to do that in counselling sessions. For some reason, I had not made the connection to the craft of management development.

When I first asked myself why I hadn't made the connection, I was disgusted with myself. Why had I missed something so obvious? Why had I neglected the early lessons which came from my professional preparation and development as a psychologist? The first and easiest answer was that I had worked for a number of years with individuals and organisations which either did not value the models of counselling and helping which I had acquired or could not see their relevance to the tasks on hand. I spoke earlier of being "in competition" with other disciplines during my time at the Public Service Board and commented that I didn't turn to psychology as a source of learning or understanding for several years. In fact, in the rush to understand and assimilate the ideas of others, and to prove myself in a tougher and more complex environment, I let go of my earlier frameworks and in some sense, threw the baby out with the bath water.

I should add that through all the years I worked with the CES and the Public Service Board, I didn't consciously or objectively think of myself as developing a personal praxis. At the CES, I tried – conscientiously! – to understand the demands, principles and concepts offered by my discipline. But they belonged to the discipline, not to me, like a coat I had bought off-the-peg rather than tailoring it for myself.

During the years with the Public Service Board, at times I was like a child in a shop, both entranced and overwhelmed by new toys, picking things off the shelf, experimenting with them and trying to understand them. At other times, I was like a reluctant army recruit, frightened by the tasks, over-awed by the skill of my colleagues and desperately trying to keep up with the rest of the troop. Very rarely did I feel that I offered anything approaching intellectual leadership to those with whom I worked.

So it is easy to say that I was simply "distracted" from my original discipline of psychology, and on a steep curve of exploration and learning about new ones.

Learning to live with uncertainty and ambiguity

Looking back, I think that something else was going on as well, It seems to me now that the attraction of the new "toys" lay in their seeming ability to provide answers to important questions being asked by clients, by stakeholders, by my colleagues and my superiors, and by me. The questions had to do with organisations' mission statements, values, strategies, systems, staffing, structures and practices. What should this particular organisation make its priority for the next three years? How should it organise itself to do that? What sort of policies and procedures would be needed? What sort of people? Where would such people be found? And so on. All of these were significant questions requiring urgent answers – and were being asked of a group of consultants who were seen as being able to provide "expert answers". It strikes me now, although it didn't at the time, that it would have required a very determined practitioner to use Rogerian client-centred methods to get answers to those questions – to say to clients: "The process we use is as important as the answers we get. Let's collect your wisdom and do this together." The method preferred by – and actually commissioned by the Public Service Board and its clients – was one that I would call "black boxing" – an independent expert analyst comes in, collects data, goes away and interprets it, and produces an answer.

To operate in a different way would be to take more time, to allow clients to develop their own views and understanding and encourage them to debate and resolve differences themselves. I believe that it would also require them – and the consultant, and all the other stakeholders – to live with uncertainty and ambiguity while those processes run their course.

The uncertainty for all parties that can be created when a consultant – or a teacher – asks questions instead of giving "expert" answers, can be a major challenge for all those involved. To live with ambiguity, paradox, conflict, or the unknown is something which some people may be better suited to than others, in terms of temperament or preference (Myers, 1962). For those who are not particularly tolerant of it, the result might well be anxiety – and even fear – and it might take considerable will-power and skill to engage in a process which demands it. For everyone, regardless of their tolerance of uncertainty per se, it might also be important for them to trust the processes being used to find answers and to trust the other people engaged in them, When both certainty and trust are missing, the response might be one of defensiveness and avoidance (Argyris, 1985). One obvious means of defence is to remove the uncertainty – and attendant anxiety – by finding an outside expert who, hopefully, can be trusted by most people.

The acknowledgment and management of uncertainty and anxiety is a theme which will recur in the rest of this chapter. When adults are invited to self-manage their own learning, I believe that anxieties are immediately presented for those who engage in learning and those who try to assist them while they do it.

Again, with the wisdom of hindsight, I would now label these reactions as being reinforced – at the time – by powerful organisational scripts, which discouraged any *admission* of uncertainty, with attendant "self-sealing" defensive routines (Argyris, 1991). What is more disconcerting to me is that one of my own personal scripts – that one that says it's important to be competent at all times – powerfully colluded with the context in which I worked.

Learning how reflection helps us to learn from experience

Another reason for being attracted to the work of the team at the RMIT was the emphasis on experience as a source of learning. Davies and Easterby-Smith (1984) are among those who have established that when managers are asked to recall events which have particularly contributed to their development, they usually describe situations which have occurred at work. They mention things like special assignments, particularly challenging tasks, things that went wrong but which taught them important lessons, and being "thrown in at the deep end". This is a question which I routinely ask both students and clients, both individually and in groups. At a guess, I must have asked it 300-400 times in the last five years. My own experience corresponds exactly with that of Davies and Easterby-Smith. And as they found, the number of formal courses mentioned by managers as having been significant in their development tends to be low.

One conclusion which can be drawn from this finding is that it would be a good thing to locate management learning as much as possible in the work situation. It can be argued (Prideaux, 1986) that when this happens, the problem of "transfer of training" can be largely solved. This is the problem of ensuring that people who attend training programs actually apply what they have learned back at work.

One of the most significant and innovative ways in which management educators have tried to develop learning based on work experience is through the action learning approach developed by Revans (1980). Some of the principles contained in Revans' thinking were described in earlier chapters. What those principles mean for the practice of management development, in summary, is to invite a manager to spend a number of months working on a new project or task, perhaps in a part of the organisation unfamiliar to that person, or in a different position. Another – related – approach is the problem-oriented process suggested by Bowden (1986) which builds

the content of a management development program on the real issues and problems facing the organisation and the managers in it.

The key to experience-based learning is that the individual is asked to access direct personal experience and practice in "real life" situations, as compared with reading about other people's experience and ideas, or simply thinking about ideas in a training situation. The role of the management educator is to facilitate ways in which people can create, access and reflect upon their experience. As described in Chapter 2, Kolb's (1984) learning cycle described the processes involved for the learner – of collecting data through experience, trying to make sense of the data, developing an idea or conclusion which can be tested through further experience and the engaging of iterative cycles of reflecting, concluding and experiencing. It is very similar to the action research cycle contained in the Methodology Chapter (Figure 1, Chapter 2).

Although attracted to the idea of accessing and enriching the experience and wisdom of the learner in this way, I had very little idea how to do it. Two of the methods used by the RMIT group were contract learning and something called "critical incident analysis", both of which are also described in Chapter 2.

I was not particularly attracted to or excited by the principle of group-based learning which was valued by the RMIT team. In practice, it meant the formation of participants into Professional Development Teams (PDTs), each PDT consisting of five or six participants with access to a member of staff referred to as a Consultant. The intention is that participants in the Graduate Diploma of Management use the team as a support, resource, sounding board and catalyst as they explore their development needs and evolve their learning contracts. At the completion of the contract, the PDT assists the individual to evaluate the learning which has taken place.

The staff member's role is described as that of "consultant" and not lecturer or group

leader. Similarly, the term "participant" is used rather than student. This is a means of affirming the course members' self-management role. The aim is to create independent self-directed actions rather than the dependent behaviour often associated with the traditional teacher-pupil relationship (Prideaux & Ford, 1988, p61).

When I say that I was not particularly attracted or excited by the idea of group-based learning, I mean that I both took it for granted (I was used to working in teams) and, I think now, I completely underestimated the skill involved in systematic and sustained team-based learning. The PDTs had a "compulsory" life of two years and participants could not change groups without great difficulty and personal effort. At that time, when I had no experience of team-based learning as I now understand it, I had no idea of what was involved in terms of skill and commitment. Now that I do, I regard it as an immense challenge, whether the team-learning lasts for hours or days or years.

Putting theories into practice

As well as working with the RMIT team, I was establishing my own consulting practice. One of my first assignments included a large contract to provide management development for senior managers (including executives) for one of Australia's best known and biggest banks. The contract extended over eighteen months and involved offering a two-day program to fifteen different groups of managers. My brief was to develop their skills in managing difficult performance problems – that is, situations where an individual's performance at work was not satisfactory and attempts at changing that situation didn't seem to have much effect.

This seemed to be a wonderful opportunity to apply the principles used so effectively by the RMIT team. I designed a program full of opportunities for managers to identify and analyse "critical incidents", to reflect on and talk about their experiences in tackling difficult performance issues, and to plan constructive and practical measures

for trying again. Since it seemed important to access their experience and wisdom, rather than "teaching" them mine, I kept my input to a minimum and proceeded down the path of self-discovery and self-managed learning.

I had tried these methods with other groups – usually more junior ones and in a variety or topic or content areas, including customer service training, career planning and the development of communication skills. I considered myself well placed to do the same thing with senior managers in a bank.

To say that I failed miserably was an understatement. The response of the first two or three groups was so overwhelmingly negative that I was lucky to retain the contract. I should qualify that statement by saying that within each group, there were a handful of people (four or five) who responded well to the process I used, but the majority (the other fifteen or so) were not keen to cooperate or engage in the process (at least, not overtly; I don't know what they were thinking privately).

It may be helpful to describe some examples of their reactions. When asked to think about a time they had found it difficult to get the desired change in performance, it was not uncommon for most of the group to say they couldn't think of a single time in their recent – that is, senior – experience as managers when they were not able to effect change of that kind. When asked to access their experience in this way, they claimed not to have any that was relevant. "I wouldn't have got this job if I couldn't manage things like that," was the usual comment. When I asked them to describe the methods they used to change other people's behaviour and performance, they replied: "I used my common sense, you don't need a theory or a technique out of a book. You just do what a situation requires."

I was at first surprised then dismayed and finally very frustrated at these sorts of answers. Why had I been given the brief, if all these people were so good at this

already? And why couldn't they even begin to describe the methods they used – surely they must have some words to share their experience and understanding of what they were doing?

Persistent efforts to get them to find the words, to talk to each other if not to me, or to write things down instead of saying them, seemed not to help. If anything, it sometimes made things worse. "You are supposed to be telling us what to do. You're supposed to be the expert," was a common response. As noted in the previous chapter, Knowles (1984) would have recognised in this the cry, "teach me!"

When I spoke to a colleague – also a self-employed consultant – about my experience, he told me that I had made a serious mistake. "Senior managers in a competitive corporate environment will never admit – in front of peers and colleagues – to not being able to do things. You should never have asked them to reflect on things they can't do or find difficult to do. That's okay for junior staff, who aren't expected to know everything, and maybe don't care if they do or not, but it's not the right thing to do with senior people like this."

I felt humiliated and naive – "How very like a psychologist I am, after all, expecting people to want to share their experience and talk about themselves," I remember thinking. I was also very puzzled as to why the principles – which seemed so attractive when spoken about by the RMIT team and read about in the articles and books to which they had referred me – didn't seem to work in practice, at least not with a group of skilled managers. In retrospect, I was experiencing first hand those barriers to learning – and reflection – which were described in the previous chapter.

Over the time of the contract, I worked with 300 managers – a fair sample (in fact, about two thirds) of all managers in the bank at what I have described as senior, but not executive, level. By executive level, I mean the top 30 or 40 positions in the bank.

The senior management group (immediately below that level) at that time consisted of about 450 people. The middle level management positions were at least double that and possibly much greater again.

The group with which I worked included managers from all over Australia, from South-east asia, North America, Europe, the United Kingdom and the Pacific Region. Although I had considerably modified my technique by the time I had finished, I still invited people to reflect on their experiences and the response patterns – at least the ones people made initially – remained very consistent – a great deal of denial that anyone at that level would have a problem and a persistent difficulty in describing what they actually did to manage the performance of individuals.

I said that I modified my technique. I was still interested to focus on their experience and wisdom, not mine, because I wanted them to experience any limitations in what they were currently doing and use that as the starting point for change. I had accessed my common sense and decided that "when we are on a good thing, we generally stick to it" (like the popular advertisement for fly spray in Australia once suggested). If what we are doing seems to work, then there is no great incentive to change, especially if one is a busy manager with little time for experimentation just for the sake of it. The incentive for change, it seemed to me, would generally come if we had a problem or difficulty that current methods were not able to deal with effectively.

I also wanted them to reflect on what they *thought* they were doing – that was the point of my questions: "How do you manage to turn around poor performance? *What* do you do? *Why* do you do it?" My reasoning was that people generally do things for a reason – they take action of one kind because they believe or hope that it will produce some kind of effect. If these managers could articulate what they believed they were doing, and why, maybe it would be easier for them and me to understand why sometimes that behaviour didn't work – perhaps because it was based on a false

assumption or belief about the situation. I was also interested to know if their ideas about how to do things bore much resemblance to the ones which I was able to offer them! I wanted to know how big was the gap – in both understanding and acceptance – that I might be inviting them to cross.

To help these managers to acknowledge that from time to time they did run into performance management problems and that occasionally they got unpleasant and unintended reactions to their well-intended interventions, I had to invent some "games". For example, I would get them to think about when they were starting out as managers, and what they had had to learn in the early days. I asked them to imagine that they were giving advice to more junior managers, and what that advice would be. I asked them to talk about the kind of experience they had in being managed by others, and what worked and what didn't work. I asked them to describe the behaviour of managers they admired for their skill in this area. In essence, I used techniques which "let them off the hook" of directly and deliberately visiting their own immediate ideas and experience ("This is what *I* think." "This is what *I* do." "This is how *I* feel."), and instead got them to start talking about the past, or other people's experience and behaviour.

It seemed to work. After some time talking in this way, I noticed that the group would start gradually – and without noticing it, I suspect – to talk about *now* and *themselves*. Generalities would give way to anecdotes – some of them already known to others members of the group – and to questions: "What do you do with someone like that?" and to advise each other: "Well, here's what I do." It was hard work, in the sense that it required careful "stage management" and some groups took much longer than others, but eventually most people found some way – individually, in pairs, in writing, out loud, with me or with the whole group – to revisit their experiences, identify the challenges and limits to their current way of doing and thinking, and start to think about what they might do differently. The experience with this particular group has

stayed in my mind – as well as in the pages of my journal – for a long time because my initial failure was so public, unexpected (by me), and so hard to fix. Although I had similar experiences, with similar and dissimilar groups, the "bank saga" also stands out for me because the experience continued over a long period of time. It is, however, representative of a series of experiences which both discouraged me and provided me with the incentive to keep trying.

I realised that there was a long distance, for me at least, between the principles of adult learning and their practical application. All sorts of things made the process challenging for me and for the people I was trying to help. Some groups – like the bankers – found it challenging to risk admitting that some things were very difficult, or even "too hard" for them, or that they didn't know what to do. Some people found it hard to take ownership of their own experience and actions – they spoke about the things which were done to them rather than the choices and decisions they had made themselves about how to act, and what to do.

Some people – like me – found it hard to live with uncertainty, when there are no clear or obvious answers – and when our experience instead of suggesting solutions seems only to remind us how complex life – and particularly organisational life – can be. To suspend judgement, to avoid offering my "expert" opinion, to encourage a person or a group to struggle for their own answers when what they wanted was a quick or easy answer from me – these were difficult things for me to do, given the preferences I have in Myers-Briggs terms (Myers, 1962) and given the experiences in consulting which I had had in the past.

However, I had seen and heard enough with the RMIT group to know that I wanted to press on, that I wanted to become better at applying the principles that I mentioned earlier in this chapter: the principle of self-management in learning, experience-based learning, and yes, group-based learning too. I was starting to realise how big a

challenge it is to create groups in which people can learn productively together, particularly when they are managing their own learning and trying to help others to do the same.

This is perhaps an appropriate time to mention that at the height of my frustration with the bankers, I conducted the series of interviews mentioned towards the end of Chapter 2. The net effect of those interviews was to make me re-double my efforts at learning to learn. I couldn't face the prospect of having to arrange for reluctant manager-learners to face life shattering experiences in order to get them into the starting gates!

And over the next year or so, in the context of general consultancy, there were many opportunities to continue to practise these things, and to become increasingly comfortable in moving to the position of "meta-me" to reflect on what I was doing.

Experiencing the power of story-telling as a means of reflection

As mentioned previously, my work at RMIT involved directing the new Master of Business in Management program. This program meant that for about ten per cent of my time I was involved in working directly with students or in administering the program (the latter was quite nominal, given the number of students). The taking up of a formal role with RMIT once again (I had taught part-time a number of semesters in under-graduate and post-graduate classes in psychology and management prior to that, over a period of about seven years) meant that I had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with post-graduate students as well as academic colleagues. I will treat separately some of the specific encounters with these colleagues which profoundly influenced my praxis over the following five years. The focus in this part of the chapter will be on the experiences I had in working with students.

In the previous chapter, I quoted the impact on Schon (1987) and Knowles (1978) of

Rogers' (1969, pp103 and 277) statements about "teaching being a vastly over-rated function." Those statements of Rogers (which were quoted extensively in that chapter), were not ones that I had read at the time, despite having read a lot of Rogers' work. I wish that I had. It took me a great deal of time to come hesitantly and halteringly to the understanding that those words of his express. What I *did* know was that I, like Rogers, had increasingly little wish to "*make* anyone know something" (Rogers, 1969, p103).

My practice, whether working with the whole group or with individual learners in what is known formally as "supervision", was to provide some starting points – sometimes in the form of trigger questions – which would encourage people to reflect upon the experiences which were forming the basis of their own action research projects.

In the first couple of years, these questions were of a general kind, such as:

- What are the critical incidents that stand out for you since we last met?

- What were they about? Who was involved? What was said or done by you and others? What did you think and feel at the time? Later on? What were the consequences or outcomes for you or others?

- If you were to have that experience over again, what would you do differently?

What followed was always an exercise in story-telling – usually by private reflection and writing – in small groups or in the whole group. The "ground rules" were that others in the group would "consult to" the story teller, using skills in listening and inquiry, that would help the teller of the story to make greater sense of the experiences being related.

The skills of individuals in consulting to others varied considerably, but over the course of twelve months, as stories were told and re-told, and as everyone got lots of practice in telling, listening and inquiry, it was rare not to see a considerable shift in the skills of most of the group. What is interesting for my present purpose, however, is the role that I – or other members of the faculty who might be present – took in these proceedings.

I was conscious, at the start of the year, when the group was initially forming, of taking a lead role by explicitly modelling the kind of conversation that might be helpful. This process of modelling was assisted very much when, after the first year, I had developed my thinking about the concept of "personal scripts" described in the previous chapter. I used to offer that concept, and then model, through dialogue with one of the participants, the ways that scripts might be surfaced and helpfully examined. I used to focus on *what* was being surfaced, starting with "easy" or "obvious" examples of scripts which were very self-evident both to their "owner" and to the observers. These "easy examples" were selected in order to make the process non-threatening – even fun! – and then it became a little bit more focussed and a bit more searching. Later in the chapter I will discuss my specific approach to these conversations in more detail, since they are at the core of my own practice in helping to facilitate deeply reflective learning.

The point, for the moment, is that having modelled something which was observed to be helpful and which looked relatively easy, my intention was to begin to establish a climate in which individuals would feel comfortable in working in this way with each other.

And that is largely how it happened, and has continued to happen, both in working in an academic setting and with clients in consultancy situations.

As time has gone by, I have become much more explicit to individuals at the outset both about the *what* and the *how*. To elaborate on *what* we are doing, as well as offering those simple trigger questions mentioned earlier, I "coach" people in developing questions relating more explicitly to the development of their praxis – whatever field it is in. I talk to them about the concept of praxis and how praxis can be developed by asking searching questions about what they are doing and how they are doing it: I also discuss and model more explicitly the basic helping skills of active listening, suspending judgement, inquiry and re-framing.

But once this "scene-setting" is done, my role changes and I find myself participating in the group as a co-learner rather than as "leader" or "teacher", sometimes having the benefit of the group consult to me.

As I describe this form of work, I am conscious of how far removed it is from that early experience with the bankers, when maintaining the role of expert was very important – for me and for them.

In writing this, I am conscious also of how difficult it is to truly understand both what one is doing and the genuine intent behind the action. It would be silly to say that I am no longer conscious of the need that many – most? – groups and individuals have for some kind of "certainty" at the outset of learning or problem-solving processes. Some will want certainty about the substance or content of what's being done and what the outcome will be; some will want certainty about the process – how we will achieve these things; some want certainty about both. I think that what has really changed is that I am personally more confident about saying to people, in effect: "Within useful and agreed parameters, let us keep an open mind about what we will produce here; but let us be rigorous and careful about our process, so that we don't inadvertently limit our outcomes by the processes we use."

Because I am more confident in saying that, and in describing and modelling what I mean by process, I think I project confidence which in turn is taken up by the group. In some circumstances I say things like: "Nothing will happen here today that we, between us, can't work with productively and creatively, if we put our minds to it. We might argue, we might feel disappointed, we might feel that we are getting stuck, we might feel despair or rage or whatever it is. But if we acknowledge these reactions and put them at the disposal of the group, and if we make it our collective responsibility to work through them, then we can do whatever needs to be done."

Having offered the group some "certainty" at the outset, my interventions in the group are usually limited to those times when the group signals – either directly or indirectly – that they are "stuck" and want some assistance. Sometimes my intervention will be to invite them to explore their "stuckness" and sometimes it will be to move them through it by providing an alternative frame for what's being done – in terms of either the content or the task.

This is always, and inevitably, an exercise in the management of uncertainty – mine and theirs. But the choices about its management – on my side and, if I work effectively with my clients, on their side as well – are at least being informed by a recognition of our needs for certainty. We are not using a defence routine that "seals over" either our need for certainty or our lack of it.

This transition in practice has not been achieved easily. There have been many times when groups or individuals have not wanted to engage in that sort of process, or have been self-conscious about doing so. One of my Master's groups did not want to engage for a whole year, causing me – and them – to have serious crises of confidence about what we were doing and how we were doing it. My diary is full of incidents with individual clients when I felt at a complete loss to know what to do, have experienced their disappointment and my own sense of incompetence, berating myself for not

recognising the problem or for not having the courage to name it, seeing in retrospect the "obvious things" that I missed at the time.

Reflecting on reflection: trying to be "critically subjective"

Since this is a case-study in self reflective learning, I need to explain as well as I can how this reflective learning happened. It happened in four ways: by reading and re-reading my diary entries; by gaining insights from the literature about the things that limit and assist learning; by working and reflecting with people who, by their own words and actions both challenged my own practice and extended it; and by valiantly trying to practice the art of "reflection-in-action", to go to second and third position while in the midst of experience in order to make sense of it and create new options for action. On a really good day, my clients and colleagues go to second or third position with me and our sense-making is collective.

I think this thesis attests to the way in which the literature has informed my understanding of what I do. And the short stories will give some insight into how my colleagues helped. Before turning to those stories, I would like to explain the way in which diary work assisted me and to describe my efforts at reflection-in-the-midst-of-action.

At this point, I'll return to Rainer's (1980) work in order to explain more fully what her ideas did for me. I'd read Rainer's book *The New Diary* (Rainer, 1980) and Progoff's *At a Journal Workshop* (Progoff, 1975) and found them both very helpful. Rainer suggests that the act of writing can be helpful in many ways and offers many techniques to that end. Between them, they tap into four basic ways in which human beings engage with themselves and their world – the dimensions of sensate experience, intuitive and imaginative possibility, emotional expression, and cognitive sense-making. As a direct result of being introduced to diary work, I started to use the

process of note-keeping and the preparation of "field notes" in quite a different way. Words – my own and other people's – suddenly became very important. I became conscious of the times – and it seemed that there were a lot of them – when I would search for a "correct" professional term for something, instead of writing the words which others had actually used or which spontaneously came into my own mind. Over time, I became used to writing and then writing about writing, and I became more sensitive to the fact that I needed to do that kind of writing in addition to engaging in face-to-face dialogue.

As mentioned, Rainer suggests that there are four broad forms of diary writing, which respectively tap into the senses, the imagination, the heart and the head of the human being.

Sensate experience is heightened and remembered through *descriptive writing* – the most common and familiar form of expression in diaries. This can include any narrative account of external and internal experience – events, feelings, dreams, people, places, and in Rainer's view, satisfies the:

> defiant human desire to preserve certain "unforgettable" perceptions against the annihilation of time. There are moments which, for the artist in all of us, seem too important to pass into oblivion ... description does not transcribe reality, it re-creates one person's view of experience. Diaries have less to do with objective observation than with individual perception (Rainer, 1980, p56).

She also observes that in the act of description, we, inevitably, start to transform our experience.

> Anais Nin's diaries show how individual perception – more than any other factor – transforms the quality of experience. Some of the incidents she turns into magic in her diary were actually everyday occurrences that another person might have overlooked. But she observes the immediate world around her and finds the significance or symbolism just beneath the surface of the mundane, as in this diary depiction written in 1943:
>
> > In a Chinese shop I bought a Japanese paper parasol which I wear in my

> hair. So delicately made, with coloured paper and fragile bamboo structure. It tore. I repaired it with tape.
>
> When Samuel Goldberg took us to Chinatown for dinner I went into a shop to ask for parasols. The woman who received me was very agitated: "No, of course I don't carry those. They are Japanese. You bought them in a Chinese shop? Well, that may be, but they're Japanese just the same. Tear it up and throw it away."
>
> I looked at the parasol in my hand, innocent and delicate, made in a moment of peace, outside of love and hatred, made by some skilled workman like a flower. I could not bring myself to throw it away. I folded it quietly, protectively. I folded up delicacy, peace, skill, humble work, I folded tender gardens, the fragile structure of human dreams. I folded the dream of peace, the frail paper shelter of peace.
>
> The insignificant parasol becomes a vehicle for Nin to articulate her personal reverence for peace during the hatreds of wartime.
>
> In her diaries Nin not only described her world as it was but also as it appeared to her, enlivened by her values and perceptions. She wrote because she had to, to create a world in which she could live. In so doing she didn't avoid reality but embraced it and transformed it. Though the actual experiences are gone forever, the world she created lives as she captured it (Rainer, 1980, pp58-59).

Cathartic writing is done under the pressure of intense emotion that calls for immediate expression. This kind of writing might be disjointed, confused and full of seemingly unrelated thoughts and events, or it might take the form of extended, repetitive emotional language: "It hurts. I'm afraid. This can't go on. How has it happened? Who can help me? How long can I bear this?" It might be full of exaggerations and distortions, an extended curse to let off the steam of anger and resentment; or an expression of joy and excitement: "It's happened! We're going to America! I can't believe it! We're *going*!" As Rainer observes, many diarists find that they need to allow an emotional, spontaneous, cathartic expression before they can understand or transform it through the use of other diary devices.

Free-intuitive writing comes from the world of the imagination and the inner consciousness. Rainer observes that messages received from the unconscious through free-intuitive writing can sometimes contradict feelings expressed in cathartic or

descriptive writing and possibly operates by removing or putting aside the control of the conscious mind. It can also have important creative uses, tapping into our capacity to imagine possibilities that are not supplied by our immediate experience or "reality". This kind of writing requires an ability to relax, and just "go with the flow" of whatever comes to mind without worrying about whether it makes sense. In this mode of writing, nothing is irrelevant, and the diarist tries to capture every word and image that occurs. The lack of "self-consciousness" and "self-censure" associated with this kind of writing means also that the "mental models", assumptions and other personal scripts of the writer might be more directly recognisable. Argyris' (1991) "left- and right-hand column technique" – in which people are asked to write down one side of the page what they actually said, and on the other side of the page what they were really thinking – is a more structured form of free-intuitive writing.

Rainer uses the term *reflective writing* for the kind of writing in which one stands back to deliberately reflect on one's life and writing. This "third position" writing sometimes uses the abstract "you", indicating distance and de-personalisation: "It's hard when you are loved for the wrong things, or for things that shouldn't be important." Or it might take the form of speaking directly to the self, giving advice, coaching, encouragement or wisdom. "The Silver-Lining Voice" of self-helping and healing, "seems to enter a diary spontaneously and of its own accord, without any conscious effort on the part of the writer ... (it may be) a truth that the diarist had resisted when other people had suggested it" (Rainer, 1980, p69).

Some of the specific diary techniques described by Rainer include "mind-mapping", "unsent letters" and "dialogue". The latter draws on the Gestalt therapeutic technique (for example, Perls, 1969) of getting into an imaginary "conversation" with another person or with some part of oneself. One can "dialogue" in this sense with aspects of one's personality, one's self-doubts, people one knows or has never met, historical personages, dream figures, animals, fears, inanimate objects, images, symbols, part's of

one's body, one's religious, racial or cultural heritage, events or institutions. One can even use the device with "nameless voices that seem to be arguing in your head and sending insistent messages" (Rainer, 1980, p103). In the dialogue, one simply addresses the subject, whatever it might be, and simply allows it to speak in response.

Rainer observes that the Gestalt dialogue often appears in diaries when the writer senses the need to re-integrate parts of the self from which he or she feels separated or threatened (such as one's "angry" self, one's creative self or one's childhood self) or to get into conversation with people with whom one has trouble communicating.

I would contend that all of the forms of writing and the specific techniques described by Rainer are capable of triggering "reflection" in the sense that I have used the term in this thesis. Although some writing clearly comes from "first position" (without thinking or self-consciousness), once on the page, the words can become the subject of second or third position contemplation, in which personal scripts which were not part of one's awareness become easier to see – and ultimately, to possibly accept, and change.

To Rainer's work was added, courtesy of one of my colleagues, the concept of "grounded theory", as developed by Barry Turner (1988) among others. Turner's work was mentioned in earlier chapters, because one important aspect of this concept is the need to pay attention to the mental models which potentially sit behind the words on the page.

A specific example of using the diary to surface a personal script

I took Turner's idea and extended it to the notion of searching for personal scripts more generally, with the result that reading and re-reading my own diary has surfaced a very fundamental personal script. It goes something like this:

> To be an effective teacher or consultant, you must always accurately assess what is going on with the whole group, in terms of its dynamics, and you must always accurately assess what is going on for any of the individuals in it, and you must always know what is the best thing to do for them.

I have come to believe that this personal script was very prevalent in the way I operated in most of my professional life in counselling, research, management and consulting, until about four years ago when I surfaced and recognised it.

It did not go away, since it seems to be a very fundamental part of me. I can, however, train myself to be on the lookout for it, to recognise the early warning signs that it is in operation. Unless I do that, I am in the paradoxical position of espousing a set of theories (about adult learning) which are not reflected in what I actually do.

There are a couple of examples of the diary entries that generated that insight.

> This marks one of the worst days of my life. I needed that assignment and to publicly stuff it in front of Elizabeth herself – of all bloody people – means I'll probably never work in the field again. This is a small town and people have long memories. Why the bloody hell didn't I just bang their heads together and tell them to grow up. Why was I so afraid? Why? Why? What could they have done to me? As it was, I looked a fool, a complete incompetent who should never be let loose in the public domain (November, 1990).
>
> This is a nightmare. God help me for ever thinking I could do this. Whatever I do makes it worse. I've lost it in just the worse way. I'm shut up here with them for a week. I want to leave. If things aren't better tomorrow, I think I will. They are such buggers to each others and to me. But I knew that when I came – I knew in my bones they were going to be difficult. Why didn't I call it when I first saw it, instead of being caught up in this mess. I knew it. I knew it and yet I ignored it because I wanted to see it through. But why fall into the mire myself? I'm supposed to know better, my head does know better. So why am I afraid? Why don't I do what I know needs to be done? I had the moment – I had it several times over, but I was bloody paralysed. I'm inept beyond belief (February, 1991).
>
> This was very frightening but I think I handled it okay. I don't think they knew. But God, it was close. I'm getting better at wearing the mask. I kept going even though they were upset and I was upset and confused. In the end we got there but I had to paddle very hard. I've got a splitting headache but it was worth it (March, 1992).

I should explain that all these entries were generated in the midst of consultancy experiences which – when I look back on them now – would have tested the skills, wisdom and self-control of anybody who attempted to work with the groups. These were amongst the hardest assignments I've ever tackled. What was interesting to me, in reading about them, was that I ever thought that it was somehow my fault that these experiences were as awful as they were. In all these events, what was being enacted – or re-enacted – was a team script that was deeply entrenched and deeply toxic for all parties. My lack of wisdom was not so much in being unable to deal with the dynamics of the group, but in shouldering responsibility for them, genuinely believing that what had happened was somehow down to me, or that somehow, by donning the mask of competence, I could make it all right for them.

With time, my diary work began to focus on the early warning signals and to giving myself "reminders":

> I feel like I felt at the dinner I gave for my 40th birthday – you can ask the people to come but you can't force them to have a good time. You can't create learning/reaction/engagement out of thin air – it happens only when the people allow it to happen or create it themselves. What is the burden of responsibility I carry in myself to be the powerhouse and entertainer? I need to let it happen; let them make their own connections. Sometimes it needs to happen more slowly, without anxiety from me. This is where the people are; meet them where they are, not where I want them to be (April, 1990).

> I'm doing it again. Getting stuck on the design issue because I keep asking myself: Will they like it? Will it be interesting enough? Will it entertain them? I sound like a circus manager, or a nightclub act – wheeling the acts on and off the stage, getting the timing right, juggling the coloured balls. There has to be a more immediate way to engage them without "dressing up" what I'm doing (August, 1991).

What was being surfaced here were some key concepts about how I saw my role as a consultant – that it was up to me – single-handedly – to be the engine-room, the power-house, the generator of the group's energy, as well as the container of its anxiety and the leader of its intellectual effort.

Those *are* important issues and tasks for the group: What *is* deeply interesting to us? What *is* the most important work we need to do together? Do we have the wisdom to do it? Can anyone else help us? How? How will we get the best out of working with them? How will we sustain and most productively harness and manage our energy?

The point is, as I now see, that those are issues for the group and whoever works with them to ask and answer together. The facilitator or consultant's role, for me, is to make every effort that I can to ensure that those issues are surfaced and discussed as fully as they need to be. And in fact, that is largely how I "earn my keep" as a consultant, precisely by asking: "Why are you interested in working on this? Why are some of you less interested than others? How can I help you in ways that genuinely add value to the ways in which can already help yourselves?

I ask these questions when I first meet with clients and students and I go on asking them as we work together, and I encourage them to ask and answer these questions for themselves.

Reflection while in-the-midst-of-action

I spoke earlier about practising the art of reflection-while-in-the-midst-of-action, and my diary also gives some insight into how my practice has developed in this direction.

> I felt, today, that I finally climbed a high mountain and saw the world spread out around me. It was truly a peak experience. I want to savour it, it's so rare. I worked with 120 people and we did active listening and immediacy, and I modelled it and stopped the action at intervals, and processed what I was feeling and thinking, what the other ten who were directly participating in the activity were thinking and feeling, and how the observers – all 110 of them – were thinking and feeling. It was the greatest act of attending, listening, being there and being accessible that I have ever engaged in. It felt like "oneness", it felt

> like all my senses were open, that my intuition, and heart and brain were all in there, but that nothing was getting in the way and that it was easy. Hard in terms of concentration, but easy in the sense of knowledge-in-action. Thinking about it now is like drinking the headiest wine imaginable (February, 1992).
>
> She was right. It's just about attending, being there, filtering nothing, being aware of it and going with it, articulating only what's necessary but letting them know what you see and hear in ways that match and then slightly add to their own understanding. Not rushing it, not informing or taking over, but pacing the reflection and the addition of meaning. It works, it really works. Why ever did I think it was more complicated? Why ever did I think I had to be wise? (June, 1992).

What is being described here are my early experiences in trying to use reflection-in-action to help me develop my facilitation skills. In particular, I was trying to work with individuals and groups to help them surface some aspects of their scripts that might be limiting their capacity for effective action in certain situations. By this time, I had well and truly "re-visited" the helping or counselling literature and had sharpened my practical as well as my intellectual understanding of active listening and a skill which has been labelled "immediacy" by Carkhuff (1969) – the skill of operating in the "here and now", with all the data which arises out of an encounter between oneself and others. I had also had the benefit of working with a colleague in ways which will be described in one of the short stories.

This combination of practice and exposure to the literature had both heightened my awareness of what I was doing and at the same time had given me the tool for high level reflection on what I was doing. In the act of attending to and being immediate with others, I was able to attend to and be immediate in my own inner dialogue. This kind of reflection is not a matter of simply putting myself on hold to attend to someone else. It is about being deeply attentive to all that is going on in the dialogue, surfacing that data (either internally or directly in the dialogue with the other person) and finding helpful ways to access and offer data that seems relevant.

This is a highly skilled piece of behaviour. In the final chapter, I will attempt to "pick

it apart" conceptually, to describe and explain how and why it works. For now, I'm keen to try to convey what it is like in action. In practice, it results in a kind of internal dialogue that goes like this:

> This person seems very sad. As she talks to me about her efforts to work with this group, and how "nothing seems to work", she conveys that she has thought very deeply about the problems, is frustrated about her inability to somehow shift the thinking and behaviour of the team, and that it's time to bring in the heavy artillery (ie. a consultant). It's tempting for me to ride in at the head of the cavalry. I can hear myself about to say – "Of course that's worth trying, which date did you have in mind?" I can hear her expectation and feel my own desire to meet it: "I've heard you are very good and I think that if you can exercise a bit of discipline and urgency in your facilitation, they will respond to a stranger."
>
> At this point, it's very important for me to attend to what she is communicating at every level – both verbally and non-verbally – about her perceptions and feelings about her team and her experience of working with them. It's also important that I hear what she's communicating – verbally and non-verbally – about her expectations of me. It's vital that I hear my own internal response to that communication. It's important that I reflect back to her what I have heard and seen in the most helpful way that I can. And by helpful, I mean ways that will help her and me to make sense of what's happening to her and her team and ultimately, find ways of constructively changing it.
>
> Initially, I try to reflect back what she has said and that might have the result that she says more because she knows I am interested and listening. I might offer a summary that actually captures the essence of what she has said and – by distilling the essence – adds a little to our understanding of it. If this seems to help, I will try to capture some of how she might be feeling – and that might trigger a different, and deeper telling of the story, of her intentions and her reactions. We might explore how her intentions and reactions have impacted on the situation, for better or worse. The conversation shifts from what I might do for the group to what she has been doing and could do for the group. As she speaks, I try to actively attend and listen as deeply as possible, noticing everything about her as she communicates with me – including the language she uses and the non-verbal parts of the communication – and I ask myself: If I were a member of her team, what would I be feeling, if this is how she communicates? Would it turn me on or off? I eventually ask her to examine that herself. When she does, we both sense that part of the problem is the way she tackles the problem.
>
> At the end of the conversation, I maybe have a consultancy assignment, maybe I don't. She might not need me at all, or might not need me in the way she thought she did. I might end up working with her, not with the group.

Working in this way has required skills in attending, suspending judgement, and

actively listening to her and to myself. It has required reflection in ways that did not run significantly ahead of her of capacity to "hear" them – in other words, the sense-making process had to proceed at her pace, not at mine. Any re-framing of the situation had to grow out of her reflection on it, not simply be "dumped" by me. In any event, my re-framing of it might not be correct. It is *her* search for meaning, after all. I might be confused by what I'm hearing and seeing and confused by my own reaction to it. In some circumstances, I might be emotionally "hooked" at some level, and have to find a way to both surface that and work with it. As I help in the search for meaning, I might be looking through my previous experience, as Mintzberg (1973) and Nonaka (1991) suggest, looking for metaphors or templates that might help both of us make sense of what is, for both of us, a new and baffling situation. While all this is going on. I need to be extremely aware of what I'm communicating to *her*; of what my verbal and non-verbal messages are.

As will be explained in the final chapter, I cannot agree with Schein (1993) that this is simply active listening with a focus on one person's feeling and experience, and that it is not genuine dialogue. The dialogue with myself is continual, and my dialogue with her will have phases where I talk directly to her about how I think I can or can't help, where I ask her to clarify my thinking, and where we engage very explicitly in sense-making: Is it like this? Or this? Or this? What do we do *now*?

To fully appreciate the shift in learning and practice which all of this represents for this writer, I must take you back to the picture of myself offered at the start of this chapter: an "expert", inclined by training, experience and preference (I am an ENTJ in the framework of the MBTI, Myers, 1962) to offer judgement, advice and rational thinking as my first reaction and input in any encounter or situation. To that profile I must add that I am a classic ENTJ, full of imaginative possibilities but dis-interested in detail and especially sensate observation of others or myself; and unlikely to recognise my own or others' values and emotional reactions except in a delayed and uncalibrated

way. It is an understatement to say that I have re-invented myself. Through continued scrutiny and practice I have had to fully experience my prevailing first position behaviour, and the raw material (scripts) on which it was based, and learn its strengths and limitations and learn to work with that raw material in new ways.

At my best, I engage my senses in order to be fully attentive, I use my imagination and intuition to provide templates and metaphors from my previous experience, I engage my feeling sense in ways that don't diminish either me or my client, and I use my well-developed thinking capacity to orchestrate the whole.

In the next section of this chapter, I try to describe how my understanding and skill in these areas was extended by working through co-operative inquiry and practice with colleagues.

Part B: Learning with others: co-operative inquiry and practice

Introduction

In this part of the chapter, I will relate the four "short" stories focussing on the co-operative inquiry and practice entered into with four colleagues. These stories attempt to relate how theory and practice were integrated – in other words, the continue to track the development of the writer's praxis.

Each story is followed by a summary of the key foci of praxis development.

The names used to differentiate each of the stories are fictitious, but the stories themselves are not.

"Rebecca"

"You have to love them," she said.

"What?! What kind of half-baked bullshit is that?"

"This is a farce."

"What's love got to do with it?"

In the ensuing exchange – which I was not present for, but had re-played to me by a number of participants, blow-for-blow – no-one did find out what she meant by loving them. The debate took a different turn, became passionate about other ideas and other problems. But I'd heard her use those words before, and I thought I knew what she meant.

I had known Rebecca for a number of years but had only recently started to work with her, and to talk with her about that work.

The kind of work we were doing was in a hospital setting, with nurses and cleaners and cooks and allied health professionals and doctors and administrators and clerks with anyone, in fact, who wanted to come along to learn about performance appraisal – both as appraiser and appraisee.

The people came in large numbers. We ran many sessions together over six weeks, never working with less than twenty-five people. I thought I knew about active listening – although I hadn't been back to the books for many years, and hadn't actually talked or worked with a colleague to get feedback on my skills since being a post-graduate student. So, "I'll do that bit, if you like," I said. "Fine," she said.

After a couple of sessions, I asked her what she thought. "It seems to work okay. I think they're getting the hang of it. Let's keep going."

So we kept going, until one day, in the middle of a session, she got into dialogue with one of the participants who was feeling angry and affronted about the whole business of performance appraisal.

"This is all a management push to get us to do their dirty work for them. They run the place, they call the shots, and yet they expect us to haul our people over the coals, because the place isn't performing. I want no part of it." The person who said this was almost shaking with rage, his face was red, his voice loud and furious. As he spoke, he stood up and made as though about to leave the room.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, and I can see you're really pissed off. But before you go, I'd like to hear you out. Please stay and tell us why you're so angry."

The man stopped and half-turned back. "Why would you care! They pay your bills. You're with them."

"Yes, they do. But that doesn't mean I'm not concerned for you, or want you to leave. You think that management is asking you to be unfair to your people?"

"Well it's obvious. They sit skulking in their offices on the first floor, wouldn't know anything about what's happening at the coal face, but have the nerve to ram productivity gains down our throat. You can call it appraisal, but I call it tightening the thumb-screws. And this stuff, this is a wank. My people know how I feel about them and they don't need bloody appraisal forms to find out."

"So you're being asked to do something that seems crazy when you already have your own way of managing?"

"Not just crazy. Insulting! Insulting to me and to my people. They are good people; they work hard, like me. They don't deserve this."

"I can see how some people would find this insulting. Especially when they work hard. It could seem like the last straw."

"Listen, lady. I'll tell you what is the last straw. It's being pushed around – do this, to that, on and on. Never time to get anything done properly. Always more things to do and more things to worry about. I've got plenty to worry about without this shit."

By now the man is sitting down; there are people in the group who are looking nervous – it had been a nice quiet little session until this sudden outburst. Others are nodding agreement with him. One suddenly speaks: "Joe's right. This <u>is</u> a bit of overkill. I came because I had to – my manager gave me no choice. But frankly, I've got better things to do, and there are probably others in the room who feel the same way."

"Are lots of people in the same boat? Here because you were told to come?"

Lots of hands go up.

"Well, Nita and I certainly aren't interested in making you stay here if you think it's a waste of your time. Or if you're angry about it, like Joe. Can we talk about that – it seems more important than what we were talking about before."

Joe speaks again. He looks less red in the face, but he has found his voice again, and continues for some minutes to express his anger at management and his concern for his people. Throughout, Rebecca nods her head and her face registers concern. She sits forward as though to catch what he is saying, though he can be heard clearly all

over the room. At the end of his outburst, he draws breath. "So you can see why I think it's a waste of time. I mean no offence to you. But you can see where I'm coming from."

"Very clearly, yes. And I think it's important that I understand and that others who might have similar concerns understand you are saying that your team are the kind of people who make big places like this work. And you obviously care about them. If you and they had their way, what would you like to say to management about their ideas for productivity gains?"

"To stick them up their jumper, for a start." Laughs all round the room. Joe himself smiles. He is much more relaxed. He settles down to tell us a few home truths.

The whole exchange up to this point has lasted twenty-five minutes – a big slice of the time we have for the session. At the end of it, Joe suddenly says: "Anyway, I'm tired of all this. I'm getting too old and too set in my ways to care about all this. They can do what they like to me."

Rebecca says: "What are they doing to <u>you</u>?"

There is silence for a little while. Then: "Bugger all. That's the whole trouble. They don't give a damn. <u>I'm</u> the one who cares about the team. But them, they don't give a damn. I never see them from one month's end to another. Unless they want something. And then it's usually in writing. Then I hear. But I could drop dead in the meantime. And who would care?"

"It sounds like you and your team could do with a bit of acknowledgment and a few "thank you's"."

The end of this conversation comes when Joe stands up again, and this time really does leave – half an hour before the session is due to end. "Thank you, lady. I don't agree with performance appraisal, and I don't think we'll use it. But I enjoyed your session. I'd better get back now."

It has become very clear, as this dialogue has continued, that Joe is no longer angry, but in fact very sad. At one point, he looks close to tears; at another time, quite deflated.
When he has gone, Rebecca turns to the group and says: "What did you notice about the conversation we have just had?"

Somebody says: "You did a lot of listening." Somebody else says: "You treated him with respect."

And so on. The group then spends about ten minutes renewing this demonstration of listening skills; there is acceptance and understanding of that fact that this is how some appraisal sessions might sound. Rebecca then asks: "What do you think will happen next? Will Joe change his mind? Will he make use of appraisal – for himself with his manager, or with his team?" The group is mixed. Some think he won't. Those who know him say he will, that he'll go away and think about it. They are right. He does. He comes back to the next session.

This is a very simple story, and the telling does not do anything like justice to Rebecca's skill. This man was very angry, and at times very upset in other ways. It would not have taken much for him to cry. Had they been working one-to-one, I think he would have. There was something about the size of the "audience" that stopped him – and perhaps his own pride and self-respect. At no time did Rebecca agree with him, or try to change his mind or argue with him. But she certainly signalled to him loudly and clearly that she was able to accept *him*; that nothing he said could shock her, that

she understood and cared about what he was saying.

She did not need to say: "And by the way, your mental model about performance appraisal being a waste of time is simply a part of your projection of how you feel about management." By the end of the conversation, Joe knew that for himself. He also knew what the "real" issue was: that this had as much to do with his difficulty in communicating his own needs as it had to do with management's failure to meet them.

I was deeply moved by – as well as very admiring of – her skill in working in this way, particularly in such a large group. It was as though they were the only two people in the room. There was nothing clinical or aloof about her manner, nor was she soothing and protective. She projected concern and interest through her voice, her face and her body. And though she chose her words with care, they sounded completely natural. She looked and sounded totally at ease.

When I complimented her later and asked her how she did it, what she was aware of doing, she simply said: "It's nothing special. You just have to love them, and let them know that they can say anything and it won't turn you away. And you have to pay a great deal of attention to everything that's happening. You have to be there for them, not screening out anything that's happening to you or to them. It only becomes scary when you start to be afraid yourself but haven't noticed that fact. Then, probably everyone gets scared – without knowing it, of course."

Those remarks led to a great many conversations between the two of us, punctuated by regular opportunities to work together with clients.

"Stop worrying about yourself. Listen to yourself but don't worry about yourself." "How on earth do you do that?" "Simple. Just focus on them to begin with. Look at them. listen to them, immerse yourself in them, "lose yourself" in them to start with.

Then, when you've got your radio set properly tuned in to them, start listening for the residual background noise. That noise will be you, and it will be telling you something about how you are reacting to the broadcast."

This actually takes a great deal of practice, and describing how it feels and how to do it, is a very clear example of trying to surface tacit "knowing-in-action" (Schon, 1987). The "tuning-in" requires a capacity to notice individual things about the other person – like the sound of their voice, the colour of their skin, what they are doing with the hands, the sorts of words they use, the pauses, the way they engage with the other person – and at the same time, to notice the whole Gestalt or configuration (Fagan & Shepherd, 1970), to see the whole picture.

The concept of awareness is very central in Gestalt therapy and prompted by conversations with Rebecca, I went back to my "old" text books and found Fagan and Shepherd's description of the dynamics of Gestalt formation:

> Consider a person sitting alone reading. The book holds the centre of his interest: All the rest of the room has become background; in fact his body also has become background. It is not even correct to say that he is conscious or aware of this particular reading process: he is just engaged, in contact with the ideas. Suppose that in the midst of this reading, he gets progressively thirstier. What happens is that the mouth and the inside of the mouth become figural and soon dominate the field. The book moves into the background, and the person feels something akin to "I am thirsty!" He becomes aware, in other words, of a change in himself that has implications for his relationship to the external environment. His need tends to organise both the perceptual qualities of his own experience and his motor behaviour. He may have a visual image of a faucet or a glass of water or a can of beer in the icebox. He gets up, walks, satisfies the thirst, and comes back to the reading. Once more, the ideas become figural; thirst has been destroyed.

In this simple model we have the prototype of Gestalt formation and destruction (Wallen, 1970, p9).

When attending to or focusing awareness on another person, constant cycling between the figure and the ground of the Gestalt means that sometimes little things are quite

suggestive of something that the rest of the data does not reveal: a tiny – almost imperceptible – tapping of the finger that suggests impatience or unexpressed anger; a slight repetitive movement that suggests unacknowledged nervousness. This sudden focusing on one little thing, against the background of the whole Gestalt, can also, of course, be a way that we become aware of our own background noise of unacknowledged needs and anxieties.

The awareness of the Gestalt is something that takes time because it is never revealed in one instant. It takes time to hear a story told, to see and hear how data is overlaid with more data, to hear how connections are made and not made by the story teller, to notice the implicit assumptions and the mental models that might be operating.

As well as managing awareness, the process of active attending and listening as demonstrated by Rebecca – and as written about by Rogers (1961) among others – requires that the person doing the listening lets the other person *know* that they are being heard, by non-verbal and verbal responses. As described earlier in this chapter, this is a skill in its own right, since its success depends on not "rushing" the person by adding an overlay of meaning that they cannot yet hear or explore. More will be said about that aspect of the process in the last chapter, but it is a skill in its own right – and from this writer's experience, an extremely difficult one.

Active listening emerges from all of this as a complex skill and one which is certainly not reducible to a series of mechanical "ah has", and "uh hums".
Rebecca and I wanted to explain to our clients why the process "works" – in other words, why it seems to open up both internal reflection and reflective dialogue between people. We inquired of one another how we would each explain it to someone else, with the result that we pooled our thinking into the following statement:

- when a person perceives that someone else is interested in listening to them,

they feel, at some level, valued; in the simplest terms, the person is being acknowledged: "You are here, I'm listening and what you have to say is important enough for me to pay attention to you" is the implicit message;

- encouraged by that act of acknowledgment, the person is encouraged to go on, to tell us more;

- if they continue to receive acknowledgment, they may *really* open up, expanding upon both ideas and feelings; if there is a strong feeling content, there might be a cathartic release of that emotion, even a "dump" of ideas and feelings; at this point the person might not be making much "sense" but they are engaged in some kind of "release";

- this release is often followed by a period in which the person starts to get in touch with and make sense of (reflect on) their ideas and feelings; they might undertake this exploration for themselves; they might be ready to ask for or listen to the additional meanings which the other person has to offer (provided in the form of concepts or metaphors or similes or whatever else helps).

One of the things that both of us reported, was that while this process is going on and we are actively listening to someone else, there are many times when we ourselves become anxious. We explored what this anxiety is about, and concluded that anxiety is often greatest for us when the person is either dumping ideas and/or feelings, or struggling to work out what all the ideas and feelings mean. Confusion – and a sense of "stuckness" – can seem to last a long time, even when it is only a matter of seconds or minutes. It is very tempting to "rush in" with advice at this point, especially if one feels inclined to play the "expert" or has a natural preference (in MBTI terms) for offering judgement and reaching closure. It can be tempting to offer comfort at this point, because we don't like to see someone else at a loss or in pain. When I said that,

Rebecca observed that we are also, sometimes, responding to our own need – that someone else's distress and uncertainty causes us distress and uncertainty which we prefer to soothe away for both our sakes. In encountering another's search for meaning, our own identity is tested.

This adds yet another layer to the complexity of the listening process, since one is struggling to deal with anxiety or uncertainty of which one may be only partly consciously aware. And that means paying even more attention to the background noise on the radio set.

Rebecca's work with me was probably the single most significant influence on the development of my praxis. She triggered many lines of inquiry and experimentation, only a small amount of which has been described here. She is also a person who finds inspiration in the images of poetry and painting. These words – from a song by Bob Dylan – perhaps sum up the challenge of "being there" for someone else, in the way that I learned about from Rebecca:

> You walk into the room
> With a pencil in your hand
> You see somebody naked
> And you say "Who is that man?"
>
> You try so hard, but you don't understand
> Just what you will say when you get home
> Because something is happening here
> And you don't know what it is
> Do you, Mr Jones?
>
> Ballad of a Thin Man
> Bob Dylan

Summary

The experience of working and reflecting with Rebecca provides a clear example of trying to surface what Schon (1987) would call tacit "knowing-in-action". The

practitioners were attempting to develop their skill in assisting others to reflect on experience, and on their emotional and cognitive reactions to that experience.

The points at which theory or understanding and practice were integrated were:

- the development of practitioner awareness: the ability to tune into data which is internal and external to oneself, during dialogue with another person; the capacity to notice all the data, the whole Gestalt or configuration (Fagan & Shepherd, 1970) and to constantly cycle between the figure and the ground of the Gestalt;

- the complexity of the active listening response which requires of the practitioner not only high levels of awareness but also the capacity to stay with confusion, with stuckness or with pain – her own and that of others; to test one's own needs and capacity in the act of helping another search for meaning;

- insight into and a capacity to trust the dynamics of the reflective process which awareness and active listening can trigger in another person: namely, the experience of acknowledgment (being heard and valued) followed by cathartic disclosure and sense-making.

"Robert"

Earlier in this thesis I have mentioned the way Mintzberg (1987) and Nonaka (1991) suggest that we can tap into our previous experience and tacit knowledge in order to assist us – and others – in dealing with unfamiliar but complex issues, possibilities and problems. Nonaka writes about the use of metaphor in helping to tap into and "translate" tacit knowledge and awareness. Mintzberg talks about pattern recognition – noticing similarities and discontinuities in the fine print of our experience and being able to notice new and emerging patterns before they have finally "declared" themselves. He uses the metaphor of the potter's feeling for the clay, working with it in a way that combines the vision of the artist with the reality and texture of the material being worked.

Schon (1987) suggests that a great deal of our ordinary , tacit knowledge-in-action requires remarkable virtuosity in pattern recognition. Quoting Michael Polanyi's *The Tacit Dimension* (1967), he writes:

> Polanyi wrote, for example, about the remarkable virtuosity with which we recognise the faces of people we know. He pointed out that when we notice a familiar face in a crowd, our experience of recognition is immediate. We are usually aware of no antecedent reasoning, no comparison of *this* face with images of other faces held in memory. We simply see the face of the person we know. And if someone should ask us how we do it, distinguishing one particular face from hundreds of others more or less similar to it, we are likely to discover that we cannot say. Usually we cannot construct a list of features particular to *this* face and distinct from the other faces around it; and even if we could do so, the immediacy of our recognition suggests that it does not proceed by a listing of features.

Polanyi has also described our ordinary tactile appreciation of the surfaces of materials. If we are asked what we feel when we explore the surface of a table with our hand, for example, we are apt to say that the table feels rough, smooth, cool, sticky, or slippery; but we are unlikely to say that we feel a certain compression or abrasion of our fingertips. Nevertheless, it must be from this kind of feeling that we

get our appreciation of the qualities of the table's surface. In Polanyi's words, we perceive *from* our fingertip sensations *to* the qualities of the surface. Similarly, when we use a stick to probe, say, a hole in a stone wall, we focus, not on the impressions of the stick on the fingers and palm of our hand, but on the qualities of the hole – its size and shape, the surfaces of the stones around it – which we apprehend through these tacit impressions. To become skilful in the use of a tool is to learn to appreciate, directly and without intermediate reasoning, the qualities of the materials that we apprehend *through* the tacit sensations of the tool in our hand (Schon, 1987, pp22-23).

In my view, the bringing into awareness of such tacit knowledge becomes important when trying to hone one's skills in active attending and listening to others, or in trying to help others learn to do the same thing. Awareness of the other and of oneself is central in that process.

Awareness is one thing. Having the words to describe it is another.

I was fortunate to spend a whole year working with an academic colleague who was himself very interested in the process of "noticing" and the use of metaphor and image to help us describe and learn from what we notice.

To set the scene a little, I should explain that Robert and I co-taught (we would describe it as co-facilitation) a full year of the RMIT's Master of Business in Management. Robert was involved in about two-thirds of the sessions with students. The Master's group happened to be quite a small one, that year, and the learning community which was formed gave me the most pleasurable and stimulating experience of my academic career to this point. The group created an atmosphere very conducive to the free-play of inquiry on any topic or aspect of self which anyone wanted to introduce.

Robert and I worked extensively together in the preparation and running of several workshops on self-awareness and self-understanding which formed part of the RMIT's Graduate Diploma of Management. We ran these workshops over four years, and so had many opportunities for collegiate inquiry and practice.

One day, Robert told us that he was getting tired of what he called the "heroic antics" of the management literature. When we inquired what he meant, he reeled off examples of the extraordinary qualities that great leaders are supposed to have – vision, depth of organisational knowledge, daring, courage, persistence, and the kind of probing mind that grasps complexities and turns them into imaginative and creative options, usually on a global scale. "What about ordinary people?" he said. "Does this mean the qualities of greatness which seem to have taken over our textbooks provide the model we should all aspire to? I feel like inventing a model of management that is non-heroic!"

He was quite passionate about this, and the group said, "Why don't you? What would non-heroic management be like?" Over the course of the rest of the year, we both heard successive "instalments" and, through inquiry and practice with the ideas ourselves, I think helped to shape and enrich his thinking. Even without our contribution, his thinking was extraordinarily interesting and for all of us, very helpful.

Perhaps the easiest way to describe our dialogue is to give an example. He had been reading about the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Africa, and was struck by their skill in reading the signs of the desert. These skills are vital for their survival in a harsh and unrelenting environment, and the signs they must read provide them with the basic elements of life – water, food, shelter and the ability to detect and avoid danger in many forms. "Their wisdom," he said, "is the wisdom that comes from reading the stones – from paying attention to the smallest details that suggest disturbance by an animal, human, moisture or wind."

This wisdom requires attentiveness – he called it "critical closeness" – to minute detail, the development of Gestalten in which tiny discontinuities or deviations from the norm instantly stand out. It requires patience, and "lightness of touch" so that what is handled in not destroyed, taking its potential messages with it. It also requires "respect for the ordinary", not overlooking the obvious things that might be staring us in the face, or being blinded by the spectacular. It requires a kind of humbleness.

As Robert developed his ideas further, he explained that some of his reaction against the "heroic" models of management came from a dislike of the, "drama and crisis it implies and the self-importance of the heroes and heroines who rescue us from it." A non-heroic style, by contrast, values resilience, the husbanding of energy, and ingenuity and deftness in its application. It is not wasteful of energy and resources – whether one's own or that of other people, but seeks maximum leverage – the achievement of a result which is disproportionate to the effort applied. Deftness is required in the placing of the lever, to find the point of greatest purchase. Leverage is sometimes best achieved from a distance, rather than by tackling issues and people head-on, with the direct and up-front application of power.

The group – myself included – were totally captivated by this metaphor. The manner of his offering it to us was itself a source of powerful learning for me. He offered it in a non-heroic manner – that is to say, humbly, tentatively, and in response to inquiry and interest, rather than as a formal polished presentation. As the conversations progressed, he became what I could best describe as a "story-teller" and in fact, the group would often say, "tell us another one," meaning: "Give us another metaphor."

This was not just an exercise in hearing the metaphors. We put them to work. All of the students in the group were middle-level managers in various organisations, and they thought they would like to take the non-heroic approach and discover what

wisdom they could read in the stones. They reported some fascinating experiences which significantly influenced their own practice. For example, one person related that he had started to realise that his CEO was a "big-game hunter", who actually thrived on sustaining an atmosphere of drama and suspense in the organisation: "Who will he get in his sights next?" Another decided to go rummaging amongst the stones himself, and discovered that his organisation almost completely failed to tap into the wisdom of those who actually developed and delivered the services of the organisation. The only admissible vision came from the top, from the inner sanctum of an elite few. Another reported that when he went looking for wisdom in small things, he discovered that he was too impatient for the task, too much the "big-thinker" to find it interesting.

The last reaction was very similar to my own. I have already described how difficult it is for me, a person whose preferences take her into logic, judgement, early closure and intuitive data, to pay attention and develop awareness of the quality demonstrated by Rebecca. "Paying attention" in the sense that Robert's metaphor suggested, was always going to be a challenge. The metaphor helped, however, and encouraged me to regard the act of listening as a discipline, or craft, to be mastered. I also learned, progressively, to trust my eye and ear to discern subtle shifts in the Gestalten.

It was Robert who also reinforced for me the importance of patience – that the accumulation of insight, into oneself or others or any "external issue", is not always (or even often) a matter of blinding moments of revelation, but more the gradual emergence and accumulation of insights as one walks around in circles (like the Bushmen), seeking clarity. In the sense of dialogue, that can mean "sitting things out", allowing space and silence for reflection, waiting for clarity rather than "forcing it". It can also mean having the patience to hear the story told and re-told, many times, but each time with an added layer of meaning and insight.

Like Rebecca, Robert was aware that the creation of such silence exposes us to the

experience of ourselves – to the strengths and the limits of our wisdom and skills, as well as our anxiety about ourselves, and our basic trust and self-confidence in ourselves. At such times, non-heroism invites us to experience and tolerate ourselves as "ordinary", to participate in the ordinary, without the need for special events to make us feel special.

It requires of us, also, a basic respect for what is – that learning proceeds when we come to truly "see" and "hear" and understand what already exists, before leaping to sweep it away and replace it with something new. This is not the same as saying that nothing must change. Robert described a concept which he called "radical conservatism" which, as I understand it, means the ability to engage with (listen to, attend to, see) something, someone, an idea or a situation so as to develop a state of knowingness in which its true nature is gradually revealed. In that stage of knowingness, the pattern or scripts inherent in a person, a group or an organisation, become clearer and the possibilities for growth and change are also more obvious.

As a result of working with Robert, the development of both my practice and my theory received a big injection of energy. My "reading of the stones", in terms of attending behaviour, became even more important but was transformed from something to be admired in someone else (Rebecca) and – it must be admitted – practised in rather a hit and miss fashion – to a rigorous discipline to be practised everyday. My "theory" or understanding was enriched because the concept of "respect-for-what-is" drew me again back to the counselling and therapeutic literature – this time to Gestalt therapy. I will say more about this later, but in essence Gestalt therapy offers, among many other concepts, the "paradox of change"; the nation that "one can change only when one is truly oneself".

> When we are fully what we really are, we open the possibility of making changes. Attempts to deny or suppress elements of ourselves lead to self-defeating mechanisms and rigidity of behaviour. F. Perls suggested that it is futile to attempt self-improvement in the way that most people mean it. If a person is constantly trying to improve, that person is focusing on a Gestalt about

> "trying" that will never be finished. That person changes only by stopping the attempts at improvement and by allowing him- or herself to be exactly what he or she is, thus opening the way to confront unfinished Gestalten. The only way unfinished Gestalten may be completed is by affirming the truth, no matter what it is.
>
> For a moment, let us compare the paradoxical theory of change with a famous paradox proposed by Zeno. According to Zeno, an arrow speeding on its way to its target does not move, because at any one instant of time the arrow is motionless. An instant is the eternal present, the moment of no movement; therefore, as life is a succession of instants, the arrow is motionless. Yet it still hits the target. The paradox comes from dividing time into segments so small that it gives the appearance of having stopped; yet in actuality, time does not stop, and the arrow is moving in the context of time moving.
>
> Likewise, to be totally what one is at any time does not negate the change that occurs through time. Persons can only be what they are. When they are totally in the present, they do not have a sense of change and yet, they are changing. This seeming contradiction or paradox comes from the superimposition of two contexts, the momentary and the on-going, on the notion of change (Korb et al, 1989, p70).

The other very important lesson for this writer was the practical experience which Robert provided in working with metaphor to tap into tacit knowledge and open up truly creative possibilities for action learning and change. From one single – albeit sustained – metaphor derived from the Bushmen of the Kalahari, Robert stimulated a wealth of development for me and, I believe, for all the others in the group. In that sense, Robert was like an artist in the way he worked – offering us insight into both the importance of working with and knowing intimately the clay of our experience and our personal scripts, and at the same time, using metaphor and imagination to transform the meaning and possibilities inherent in the raw material. Selection of an apt metaphor in this way is a powerful way of both making sense of and tapping into past experience, understanding what is, and opening up creative possibilities for what might be.

Robert suggested a number of other metaphors to us during our year together, including the metaphors that arise from the consideration of myth. In myth, he suggested, metaphor emerges as an identity, a person, not just a simile or an

adornment. There have been a number of books which help us to access the wisdom inherent in mythology, in archetypes and in legend more generally (see, for example, Bulen, 1989 and Estes, 1992).

Robert suggested we use this in a very practical way. "Imagine," he said, "that you wanted to invoke for yourself the power of a god or goddess, that you wanted to feel their presence, ask for their help, come under their influence, be empowered by them. You have now read about some of the Greek mythological figures: which one would you summon up if you could?"

This suggestion led to a whole day of talking and thinking and writing, some of it private and some of it shared. As people revealed who they had summoned, the group worked with them to explore how they felt, why it was important, and what it would take to summon the god or goddess at any time into their thinking, feeling and action.

On another occasion, we wrote down lists of the images we had of ourselves as managers, leaders and learners over the past twelve months. Mine included things like "being tested in the fire", of having to forge my own inner strength in order to be able to understand the heat of some of the situations in which I worked; of feeling, at times, that I needed to provide heat and energy and momentum for others. Robert's suggestion that Hephaestus might be the god whose strength I was seeking lead to a rather lovely twist: Hephaestus was the crippled Craftsman and Inventor, who made armoury and jewellery in the heat of the forge. Working alone, often consumed by passion, often feeling rejected, Hephaestus worked with his hands and heart, creating useful tools and beautiful jewellery. For someone who relies on her head and her imagination, to invoke this god is to invoke the shadow side of herself. And because of my imagination, this metaphor created insight for me that a more abstract presentation would have blurred.

The use of myth in these kinds of ways leads to any number of interesting ideas and possibilities, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore them – or the way in which I have tried to work with them myself. But before closing this part of the story, there is one other – "just one more story, please!" – pathway that was illuminated for me by Robert (to use a rather more hackneyed metaphor).

Robert told us that one of his own favourite writers is Michael Leunig, the Melbourne-based cartoonist whose pictures and words attend to the small things of life which are – at the same time – so heart-breakingly important. "He has a gentleness about him, a wryness, an astuteness of observation that I think epitomises the wisdom of the non-heroic manager."

The introduction to *A Common Prayer* (Leunig, 1990), contains a very moving and beautiful description of the act of prayer, which I think has some value in the present context. If we substitute the word "reflection" for "prayer", I think the words can speak for themselves.

> I have drawn a simple picture of a person kneeling before a duck to symbolise and demonstrate my ideas and feelings about the nature of prayer. I ask the reader to bear with the absurdity of the image and to remember that the search for the sublime may sometimes have a ridiculous beginning. Here then is the story behind the picture.
>
> A man kneels before a duck in a sincere attempt to talk with it. This is a clear depiction of irrational behaviour and an important aspect of prayer. Let us put this aside for the moment and move on to the particulars.
>
> The act of kneeling in the picture symbolises humility. The upright stance has been abandoned because of the human attitudes and qualities it represents: power, stature, control, rationality, worldliness, pride and ego. The kneeling man knows, as everybody does, that a proud and upright man does not and cannot talk with a duck. So the upright stance is rejected. The man kneels. He humbles himself. He comes closer to the duck. He becomes more like the duck. He does these things because it improves his chances of communicating with it.
>
> The duck in the picture symbolises one thing and many things: nature, instinct, feeling, beauty, innocence, the primal, the non-rational and the mysterious unsayable; qualities we can easily attribute to a duck and qualities which coincidentally and remarkably, we can easily attribute to the inner life of the kneeling man, to his spirit or his soul.

The duck then, in this picture, can be seen as a symbol of the human spirit, and in wanting connection with his spirit it is a symbolic picture of a man searching for his soul.

The person cannot actually see this "soul" as he sees the duck in the picture but he can feel its enormous impact on his life. Its outward manifestations can be disturbing and dramatic and its inner presence is often wild and rebellious or elusive and difficult to grasp: but the person knows that from this inner dimension, with all its turmoil, comes his love and his fear, his creative spark, his music, his art and his very will to live. He also feels that a strong relationship with this inner world seems to lead to a good relationship with the world around him and a better life. Conversely, he feels that alienation from these qualities, or loss of spirit, seems to cause great misery and loneliness.

He believes in this spiritual dimension, this inner life, and he knows that it can be strengthened by acknowledgment and by giving it a name.

He may call it the human spirit, he may call it the soul or he may call it god. The particular name is not so very important.

The point is that he acknowledges this spiritual dimension. He would be a fool to ignore it, so powerful is its effect on his life so joyous, so mysterious, so frightening.

Not only does he recognise and name it, but he is intensely curious about it. He wants to explore it and familiarise himself with its ways and its depth. He wants a robust relationship with it, he wants to trust it, he wants its advice and the vitality it provides. He also wants to feed it, this inner world, to care for it and make it strong. It's important to him.

And the more he does these things, this coming to terms with his soul, the more his life takes on a sense of meaning. The search for the spirit leads to love and a better world, for him and for those around him. This personal act is also a social and political act because it affects so many people who may be connected to the searcher.

But how do we search for our soul, our god, our inner voice? How do we find this treasure hidden in our life? How do we connect to this transforming and healing power? It seems as difficult as talking to a bird. How indeed?

There are many ways, all of them involving great struggle, and each person must find his or her own way. The search and the relationship is a lifetime's work and there is much help available, but an important, perhaps essential part of this process seems to involve and ongoing, humble acknowledgment of the soul's existence and integrity. Not just an intellectual recognition but also a ritualistic, perhaps poetic, gesture of acknowledgment: a respectful tribute.

Why it should need to be like this is mysterious, but a ceremonial affirmation, no matter how small, seems to carry an indelible and resonant quality into the heart which the intellect is incapable of carrying.

> Shaking the hand of a friend is such a ritual. It reaffirms something deep and unsayable in the relationship. A non-rational ritual acknowledges and reaffirms a non-rational, but important, part of the relationship. It is a small but vital thing.
>
> This ritual of recognition and connection is repeatable and each time it occurs something important is revitalised and strengthened. The garden is watered.
>
> And so it is with the little ritual which recognises the inner life and attempts to connect to it. This do-it-yourself ceremony where the mind is on its knees; the small ceremony of words which calls on the soul to come forth. This ritual known simply as prayer.
>
> The garden is watered.
>
> A person kneels before a duck and speaks to it with sincerity. The person is praying (Leunig, 1990, pages not numbered).

Summary

The experience of working with Robert illustrates the powerful application of metaphor (in the ways that Nonaka, 1991, suggests) to tap into and translate tacit knowledge-in-action into explicit knowledge. For this practitioner, that explicit knowledge was then made available and helpful in dealing with the complex and ambiguous data which are present during attempts at deep levels of reflection.

Apart from understanding the value of metaphor itself as a reflective technique, the result of working with the metaphor of the Bushmen of the Kalahari was a number of very important steps in this practitioner's praxis development. The metaphor provided words and concepts which described and explained (built meaning around) several aspects of practice. Where Rebecca had laid the groundwork by stimulating intensive excursions into practice, coupled with attempts at understanding what was going on, Robert moved the development of that understanding even further. In respect to reflection, the key elements can be summarised as follows:

- the importance of pattern recognition per se: noticing similarities and discontinuities in the fine print of our experience and being able to notice new and emerging patterns in the Gestalt before they have more clearly defined themselves (in Chapter 3 this was recognised as a critical skill in the age of discontinuity for nations and organisations); for individuals, the significance also lies in being able to acknowledge experience that is ambiguous and not yet clearly formed (whether one's own experience or that of another);

- "critical closeness": attentiveness to the detail of the development of the Gestalten;

- patience and lightness of touch so that the subject of reflection is not destroyed by the act of reflection;

- in dialogue, this means allowing space and time for reflection, waiting for clarity, not forcing it; if necessary, hearing the story told and re-told but each time with added meaning and insight;

- this implies acceptance that meaning and insight will emerge gradually and cumulatively as one walks apparently in circles; and acceptance that there will probably not be blinding moments of revelation;

- it implies deftness and subtlety in the finding of leverage, rather than the head on application of "heroic" power;

- it also implies an acceptance of "ordinariness" and a respect for what is, in one's self and others;

- it suggests a capacity to respect oneself, to experience one's strengths and the

> limits to one's wisdom and skills, to encounter and live with anxiety about one's competence-in-action; to have basic trust and confidence in oneself; and to accept the exposure of self that the reflective act entails.

Working with Robert also sowed a seed that is taken up in the next story: the concept of the Gestalt paradox of change, the idea that we can only change when we are most truly ourselves.

"Alan"

I first met Alan in the worst possible circumstances. It was during a week long workshop which was probably the worst single experience of my consulting life so far. It triggered one of the diary entries cited earlier in this chapter and at the time, seemed like a crisis of major proportions. I didn't have any idea of what to do. Everything I tried seemed to make things worse and the level of hostility and anger in the group was enormous.

My commonsense told me, in retrospect, that the anger had little to do with me. I don't offer this as a defensive excuse. It was literally the case that on the first evening, only one hour into our time together, two participants told me that they had no wish to be at the workshop; one told me that my methodology – an approach which asked them to develop a learning contract (for their own private use) was "the manipulative work of the Devil"; another, on the strength of that remark, declared that she had no wish to work with me; and the rest simply would not talk – to me, or to each other.

This workshop – which was attended by twenty-five training and development professionals – "went down in history" in that organisation, as over the months and years that followed participants analysed and reflected on what had gone wrong. The sponsor of the event – who was present that week but played little or no active role and simply let it happen – offered me a formal apology (unsolicited by me) and explained that the group had been the subject of a great deal of what she described as political manipulation by senior executives of the company, with the result that members of the group were playing each other off (and being played off against each other by others). While this is what was happening in practice, on the surface the members of the group would not acknowledge any conflict with each other. In fact, they adopted a public united stance that went something like: "We are a caring group in which anyone can say anything they like; we value openness and dislike manipulation in any shape or

form. People in this group at all times are free and spontaneous in their behaviour." This was said to me on several occasions, both inside and outside the group, during the week.

This group's anger was undiscussable and had been so "sealed-over", to use Argyris' (1991) term, that any discussion of it being avoided was itself not only avoided, but angrily denied. For example, when I tried to suggest that there was anger in the group, the hostility toward me intensified considerably. I was a natural target for all that undiscussable resentment and boy, did they have a terrific amount of target practice.

At the time, Argyris hadn't written his article, and I hadn't got that wisdom from anywhere else and I thought it was all my fault – that there must have been something I had done to cause this, and that my efforts at trying to fix my mistake were inept. Although I don't think, now, that it was my "fault", I think there were things that I could have done differently. For example, at some point during that week I could have said something along the lines of: "This clearly isn't working for you and it sure as hell isn't doing much for me, so what's going on? Let's talk." Instead of which, I battled along, thinking that if I just showed enough acceptance, openness and calmness, we'd get through it somehow. We did get through it somehow, but I think that when it came to "immediacy", to really acknowledging and surfacing what was going on in the group, my courage and skill failed me. By taking a burden of guilt and failure on myself, I effectively blocked myself and them from paying attention to their own dynamic.

If I had to work with that group again – God forbid! – I would almost certainly want to have a second facilitator, given that there were over twenty people involved. As Rebecca pointed out to me later: "You – or anyone else – would be stretched to deal with that level of anger and dysfunctional behaviour on a one-to-one basis. What on earth made you think you could do that kind of therapy with twenty people at once?"

And I would be a lot more insistent that the group develop some "ground rules" about how they proposed to reflect on any data created by or in the group, as well as on their own private experience. In one of his articles, Argyris (1991) talks about working with a group which had effectively sealed-over any discussion of their own competence (and their doubts about it) and was engaging in lots of blaming – of their clients, their management, and their competitors. He also makes the comment – which gave me belated comfort – that when a group is being very defensive, they are often feeling and displaying negative emotions, but the blame for those emotions is put onto others. The very "openness" of an "open" individual, he suggests, might arouse even greater feelings of upset and anger. So now he tells me! Although describing the symptoms very clearly and explaining the dynamics, the article is not very explicit about how to surface the dynamic. He suggests "left and right hand" column work, and patient feeding back of the data being observed by the facilitator.

I think those techniques are helpful, but I also believe that there are times when groups are so truly "stuck" in self-protective scripts, that it might take a bit more than that to surface what's going on in ways that the group can acknowledge and work on. It might help to know a bit more about how and why people and groups come to be "stuck" in the first place.

Enter Alan, who, like me, had been quite overwhelmed by what was going on in the group and could think of no constructive intervention. He did a very helpful thing, however, which was to talk to me about what was happening at intervals during the course of the week. I should add that Alan's presence was seen by the group as being a bit "infra-dig" or beneath them, in that he was not a trainer, like themselves, and was at the workshop to provide administrative and other support.

It transpired that Alan was undertaking a three-year training program to prepare him to work as a Gestalt therapist. He had just completed the first year of the program and

tentatively suggested to me that perhaps the best I could do in the circumstances was to gain some insight into what was happening to *me*. At the time, he jotted down some diagrams and notes on a rough piece of paper and tried to explain some of the Gestalt "basics" to me. The effort was not very successful in deepening my understanding because – frankly – I had reached such a point of upset that my whole mental and physical energy was directed to "not falling apart in front of the group" while working through the basic issues we had convened to tackle. And Alan, while trying to help, was for that week considerably less articulate and confident than I subsequently experienced him as being.

I still have his scribbled notes and diagrams. I gathered that he believed they were important, and I appreciated the fact that he was trying to help me. I also worked out that he was talking about something called the Gestalt cycle, that would help me to track my energy and to work at where and how it was getting blocked. I was so anxious and uncertain about what the next day would bring that I put those notes in my briefcase, took a couple fo aspirin, went to bed and stayed awake until four o'clock in the morning.

Two years later, I read an article called "Organisations Get Stuck Too", by Critchley and Casey (1989). There, on the second page, was Alan's diagram.

> The notion of a cycle, starting from rest and moving through a phased cycle of energisation back to rest, is central to Gestalt. The cycle describes the essential nature of the interaction between an organisation and its environment. It is a natural cycle and individuals move through its phases with or without help; or they may get stuck. The cycle describes a flow and ebb of energy in the continuous process of need fulfilment essential to an individual's survival and growth. We move from rest through a series of phases to full contact with our food, with our friends, partners or colleagues or issues which we need to tackle, followed by satisfaction and withdrawal.

The first phase, as a new experience begins to emerge, is internal sensation; as we begin to focus the sensation on to something or some person in our external environment, we attach meaning to the sensation; this is described as "awareness". As

we become aware of what the sensation is telling us – as we give it meaning – we begin to mobilise our energy toward the external object through clarifying the nature of the interaction we want. We then take concrete action to bring about contact; at some point when the fullness of the experience is realised, we achieve satisfaction, and then we finally withdraw from the experience and another cycle may begin (Critchley & Casey,
1989, p4).

Figure 3 represents the cycle described by Critchley and Casey.

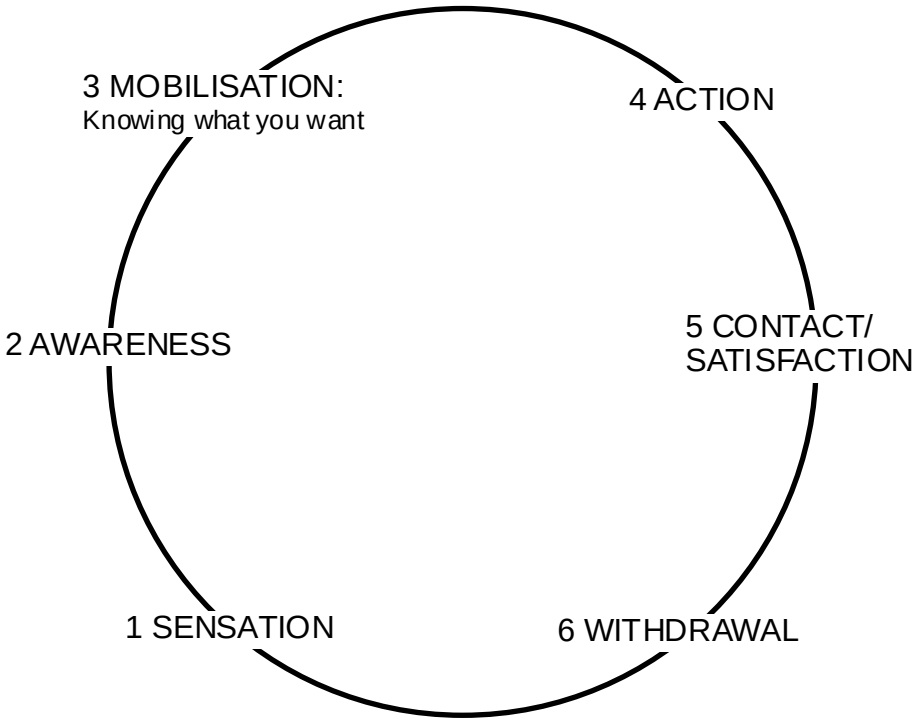


Figure 3: The Gestalt cycle of awareness (Critchley & Casey, 1989, p4)

I rang Alan in a great state of excitement. "Tell me more about this. What does it mean to *you*?"

Alan explained that the aim of Gestalt therapy is to develop more "knowing" behaviour; that is, to enable individuals to act on the basis of all possible information

and to apprehend not only the relevant factors in the external field, but also relevant information from within. Individuals are encouraged to pay attention at any given moment to what they are feeling, what they want, and what they are doing. The goal is non-interrupted awareness. By becoming more aware, individuals can discover how they interrupt their own functioning. Interruptions usually signify resistance. What we are resisting is becoming fully aware of the needs that organise our behaviour. If we become fully aware, then we are able to uncover those needs and discover the ways in which we prevent ourselves from experiencing those needs.

The concept of awareness is very important in Gestalt therapy, which also calls attention to the way in which a person blocks or interrupts his or her communication, either with their internal "self-system" or through the interpersonal system. Awareness of blocks can be facilitated by directing attention to what the body is doing, what the mind is doing, and what is or is not going on between people (motoric, symbolic and interpersonal behaviours).

"It means," he said, "that you have to meet yourself where you are, not where you want to be, and if you want to help other people, then you have to meet them where they are, not where you want *them* to be."

In talking to Alan, I had one of those "peak" experiences of insight that are so rare and so exquisite. Suddenly the wisdom that I gained from working with Rebecca about attending and "being there" had a theoretical model to attach itself to, as did Robert's insight about "respect for what is". "The paradox of change" suddenly made more sense.

Alan said that what he had been trying to do two years earlier, was help to understand how I was blocking my own awareness – both of what was going on "out there" in the group and what was going on inside me. The real need of all the individuals in the

group was to find ways to review and make sense of the competencies required of them by their organisation, and get to grips with the competencies they actually had. This need, however, was too difficult to acknowledge, given a context in which admission of any level of incompetence – or even doubt about competence – was taboo. Awareness of that need became effectively blocked.

It would have been very difficult for me – as it was for him – to help the group recognise and work with the block, given that my own awareness of important data, both external and internal, was seriously blocked. We discussed what might have been the point in the cycle at which I was blocked. After some time, we agreed that I had probably become stuck somewhere between awareness and mobilisation.

In order to work this out, Alan had to teach me about what stuckness looks like at each stage of the cycle.

Stuckness at the stage of sensation results in *repression* (the absence of feeling); at the stage of awareness it results in *hysteria* (literally a hurtling into sudden changes of anger and uncertainty that comes from the unconscious, without making much sense to the person); at the stage of mobilisation, stuckness produces a state of being *knowing-and-angry* (there is a lot of emotion and a lot of ideas, but it is not focussed; and it is disorganised and impotent energy); it produces *fear* at the stage of action (the person has focus, knows what to do but is frightened to act); being stuck in the stage of contact means being *frantic* or *driven* (the person engages in lots of activity but never "consummates", fully engages or follows through to the point where something is usefully accomplished); and at the stage of completion, stuckness results in *exhaustion* (the work is done but the person cannot leave well enough alone and withdraw).

The kind of dialogue I had with Alan was very different from that with my other colleagues. He lives in Brisbane, I live in Melbourne, and although we had exchanged

letters since meeting at the workshop, and sometimes met in the context of further work I did for the organisation (yes, I lived to fight another day – but that's another story) we had not really made or found the opportunity to talk in depth since the workshop. Until now. Galvanised by my excitement at finding the article, I talked to him without worrying about the cost of the call for nearly two hours. We met on two or three occasions over the following couple of years, but never had quite the same animation and engagement. Our relatively limited dialogue had all taken place in times of turbulence – although the second kind of excited turbulence was at the opposite end of the scale to the first turbulence of the first meeting.

Limited though it was, the dialogue was very important to me in helping to put a theoretical underpinning to the things which had engaged me both emotionally and intuitively when working with Rebecca and Robert. I began to realise that all my failures in facilitating learning and problem-solving could be traced back to a failure, on my part, to attend as fully as possible to the internal and external data, and to be prepared to meet the people where they are, not where I want them to be.

Critchley and Casey (1989) make the suggestion that just as individuals get stuck, so too do groups and organisations, resulting in some dysfunctional scripts. They also suggest that failure to be aware of the stage at which they are stuck can lead to facilitators being trapped into inappropriate interventions. The same thinking, of course, applies when facilitating or helping on a one-to-one basis. Their advice is to meet the individual, group or organisation where they are, to attend and make interventions that implicitly acknowledge the messages being given.

Their advice is summarised in Table 5.

Summary

This short story provides an example of how theory and practice were integrated into praxis for this writer. It's hard to overestimate the impact of the cycle of awareness on the writer's thinking. Along with the Gestalt notion of the paradox of change, and Gendlin's (1970) work on "self-meaning" and the role of symbolism in awareness (see Chapter 5), this material provided one of those deep "ah ha" moments of insight which suddenly illuminate experience and practice in a fairly dazzling way.

Table 5: The stages, interruptions, traps and interventions associated with the Gestalt cycle

Stage	Interruption	Trap	Advised Intervention
Stage 1: Sensation	Repression (absence of feeling)	Feeling *for* them. Trying to get them to feel, e.g. team building, encounter groups, "love-ins".	Collection of hard data about external threats and opportunities which they can believe in, or start to debate, thereby accessing "safe" feelings.
Stage 2: Awareness	Hysteria (feeling but not thinking)	Thinking for them and/or getting bogged down and "hooked" by their emotion.	Detached empathy; acceptance and acknowledgment of all emotions until the group is able to come more reflective.
Stage 3: Mobilisation	Knowing-and-angry (unfocussed thinking and feeling, confusion)	Thinking and planning for them, getting bogged down in endless diagnosis, analysis and planning.	Encourage them to "have a go" on the basis of "best guesses": experimentation, don't let action be inhibited by the lack of focus. Focus will emerge from action, not thinking and emoting.
Stage 4: Action	Fear (impotence)	Force them into premature action.	Build trust by letting them reflect on, surface, their real, perhaps unacknowledged fears and uncertainty.
Stage 5: Contact/ satisfaction	Frantic, "driven" activity (heavily into "task", lots of activity in starting things, but no sustained contact, implementation or follow-through, no experience of satisfaction, accomplishment or consummation.	"Join in" and beat them at their own game; come up with new and more efficient techniques, systems, alternatives, facts and tasks, supply "state-of-the-art" knowhow.	Get them to take time out to think about what they are doing; reframe the task to be about *how* they are doing things, not just *what* they are doing; but keep it business-like; turn everything into "task".

Stage 6: Withdrawal	Exhaustion, burn out; inability to "let go"	Enforce a sudden break from the action, tell them to take a holiday.	Gradually "ease off", but avoid sudden breaks which can lead to high anxiety, restlessness and sudden onset of illness. Find refreshing alternative tasks, until the person becomes "wholesomely weary".

(Based on the work of Critchley & Casey, 1989)

In alerting me to the value of the Gestalt cycle, Alan opened up a whole new way of understanding what it is that reflection achieves. In summary, the lessons were:

- that the goal and process of non-interrupted awareness is another way of describing what third position self-reflection tries to accomplish;

- that the goal of reflection becomes that of focussing on the way in which the other person (or oneself) blocks or interrupts his or her communication, either through their internal self-system or through the interpersonal system;

- that the act of reflection firstly requires the facilitator to identify and meet him or herself where they actually are in the awareness cycle (not where they want to be) and to deal with whatever block or interruption is in progress;

- that reflection secondly requires that the facilitator do the same for the person he or she is trying to help: that the facilitator recognise and meet them where they are, not where the facilitator wishes they were;

- that understanding of the nature of "stuckness", and how it blocks awareness, explains the paradoxical nature of change when the subject of change is human behaviour.

"Dominic"

In my telling of the three previous stories of encounters with others, the main focus has been upon the development of ideas and understanding. Although that thinking was both triggered by and tested in experience, my telling of the stories (except in the case of Rebecca) has not primarily highlighted the action experiences. The next – and last story – is primarily about action taken in company with others. The others were managers participating in a major development program for one of Australia's leading financial institutions, and Dominic, my co-facilitator and colleague.

The action takes place over the last two years of the work for this thesis, and so represents a stage which I regard as demonstrating reasonably well-integrated theory and practice.

It was – and continues to be – a wonderful assignment – a very large organisation requesting a new and innovative approach to the development of "change makers": senior people who could initiate, facilitate and lead change across many functions and levels of the business; and offering the commitment, resources and time to do it.

The people coming into this program are senior managers from all over the organisation. They make a voluntary commitment to participate in four residential workshops over eight months, and to each complete, over that period, two personal learning contracts and to each initiate "change-making" intervention in the organisation which will add significant value in terms that the organisation will recognise.

Dominic and I have spent hundreds of hours together, individually and with participants in planning, facilitating and participating in the program. Although the program's major focus is on self-managed learning, and on reflection on that learning,

the residential workshops also provide opportunity to provide some input and create experiential learning activities for the participants. "Learning to learn" and "learning to change" are key themes and every chance is taken to draw out the implications, in learning terms, of the experiences the program and the participants create.

"Designing" a program like this means creating opportunities for people to generate data – through action, discussion and thinking – which can become the subject of fairly intensive "third position" reflection. "Third position" reflection itself becomes the subject of reflection, as people "learn to learn" and experiment with change of all kinds; in themselves, their teams, their organisation's tasks, practice and culture.

Facilitation activities during the program include reflecting, with individuals and groups, on an experience they are having or have had, during the workshop or in the workplace; diagnosing development needs; reflecting on some aspect of their own praxis; and helping in the exploration and development of their own ideas and their conceptual understanding of models and theories contained in the literature.

Working in this way truly tests and extends every part of our repertoire in facilitation. The capacity for skilful reflection is not one, in my observation, that comes easily to all managers – even when confined to second position reflection, which is simply about stopping and thinking. Third position reflection – stopping and thinking about the way one thinks, for example – is difficult for most people, for all the reasons explored in previous chapters.

In these situations, it is not enough to offer a description or an explanation of reflection, and hope that everyone will immediately understand, accept and apply the idea. In assisting someone to reflect on their tasks, their praxis, their competencies and their personal scripts, one truly has to meet them where they are, not where you would like them to be.

We have found that it helps most people to have some sort of "framework" for the task of self-reflection, and to that end, Dominic and I invented the "diagnostic pyramid" which is described in the next chapter, which simply maps the layers of self-reflective work which are possible. We have found that by offering the pyramid and explaining the kind of work which can be done at every layer, the whole idea of self-reflection becomes less threatening and more like "a job of work", a task, like any other.

Of course, in practice, it is not like any other, and we have found that we need to continually model, coach and participate along with the managers as they try to incorporate self-reflective techniques into their repertoire.

Dominic is a man of few words, and I am an extroverted thinker, with the result that our dialogue has not always been easy. I have tried to slow down and switch off, creating spaces in which he can privately think. The end product of that thinking is often a "one-liner" which is not explained or justified, but simply left hanging in the air. Once in the air, my own mind and imagination takes hold of it and starts to overlay it with meanings that make sense to me but might have little to do with Dominic's own sense of things.

One such statement – often made to clients and to me – is: "What is the data telling you about what is going on out there, and inside you? What is it telling you about what you can or need to do differently, to get a different outcome?"

This is hard work, for most of us. It is hard enough to reflect on someone else's data – in the ways I tried to describe earlier in this chapter. Reflecting on one's own data, unaided, almost inevitably is limited by our own image of ourselves, as well as by the mental models which we are prepared to bring to bear on our own behaviour and interventions.

To illustrate this point, I will describe what happened on one occasion when I attempted to understand and evaluate my own efforts at facilitating someone else's reflection on their personal scripts. Then I'll compare it with the reflection that grew out of dialogue with Dominic on the same subject.

I had been working for about an hour with a manager who said he had no idea of anything he might do to improve or enrich his practice as a manager. He had been in the job for fifteen years and in the company for all of his working life (about thirty years). "There is nothing about the job I can't handle and my boss's job just doesn't pose a challenge either – I've been relieving in his job for a total of six months out of the last two years. I can't think of anything that would stretch me, now," he said.

He was not being obviously "defensive"; he seemed to be genuinely struggling to find a development opportunity that "wasn't just a wank, or doing something for the sake of it."

As he talked, I was trying to collect data myself – his choice of words, the way he spoke, his non-verbal behaviour, his way of communicating with me and others. I noticed that he seemed relatively low in energy, and that though he talked a lot in a low unvarying tone, he showed little interest in any of the comments or suggestions made by others in the group. To every idea, he replied with a "yes, but": "yes, I think that's a terrific idea; trouble is, we don't have the sort of resources that something like that would need; I can't just go off and do my own thing." He did not, any at stage, ask a question or encourage anyone in the group to share their thinking with him.

The tone was serious, flat, self-contained and containing – in the sense that his responses to people seemed to close off conversation, rather than open it up. After a while, I think others in the group started to find him "heavy going" and the silences got

longer. I examined my reaction to him. I found that I was a bit bored, that I was having to work hard to pay attention because he offered so little opportunity to actually "engage" with him. He almost seemed to be talking to himself. It occurred to me that if we found him boring and "heavy going", then probably others did too...

So I asked him: "When was the last time someone in your organisation showed a genuine interest in your ideas about things the organisation needs to do over the next two to five years to maintain its competitive position?"

"What would they come to me, for? Our State has its three year rolling business plan, and my job is simply to help make it happen. I'm not paid to be an ideas man, if that's what you mean."

This was not said sharply or aggressively, but in the same matter-of-fact, low tone of voice.

My internal dilemma was: How does one constructively reflect back to the man that the reason no-one shows interest in him is that he shows no interest in others, even when they are trying to help him? That the reason be he can't find development needs and opportunities is that he even lost interest in *himself* some time ago..?

Written in bald words, there are a great many presumptions in that speculation of mine. Nonetheless, that's what was going through my mind and that's what prompted me to spend the next half hour trying to get him interested in being interested. I did not feedback my own experience of him, but asked questions like, "If you could change anything in your organisation, what would it be? What really grabs *your* attention these days? If you could do anything, what would it be?" I was aware that he was introverted, in Myers-Briggs terms, and so I was careful not to "put him on the spot" by pressing for immediate answers. I just suggested that these would be questions to

think about. He dutifully wrote them all down.

I made jokes, trying to draw him out, to entertain, divert and engage his interest. I talked a bit about myself and things I had tried to do in the past that were a bit "different". He was polite, he even smiled at my jokes, but he did not offer any more than he had earlier in the conversation.

When I reflected on the conversation later, in my diary, I chastised myself severely. Why didn't I just do what I tell others to do. Meet him where he is, rather than where you wanted him to be? Why didn't I just meet his silence with companionable silence; eventually find a way to reflect back to him my own sense that he was somehow stuck in a rut of his own making? I reminded myself of my own best advice to myself: "all your failures and mistakes stem from a failure to actively listen." My report card at the end of the session read: "must try harder at active listening."

Some time later, I described this encounter to Dominic: "So *why* didn't you listen?" he asked.

"My usual ENTJ stuff. I had a solution, I wanted him to buy it," was my reply.

"Was it that? Surely you can hear yourself doing that now? I thought you were generally very good at putting it "on hold". Was something else going on?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Think back. Play "the tape" over carefully in your mind. What were you thinking and feeling about the others in the group, for instance. And what were they doing while you were talking with him?"

I started to reconstruct the situation in my mind. I became aware that at the time I had felt under some kind of pressure. Pressure to do what? From where? Under pressure from myself to "perform", to establish my credentials in the group as a good facilitator who could quickly get a result. The need to be seen as competent overcoming the disciplined practice of a learned set of skills.

As a matter for my practice, this small example raises several issues. The first and most obvious is to be as fully aware as possible of one's own awareness, at the time. The second one is to have the confidence and patience to sit in a rut with someone else while they fully experience the size and extent of the rut and realise the bit of it they can take responsibility for themselves. The third, as important of the others, it to always pay attention to the effect one is having on the other person. The fourth is to sometimes surface the immediacy of the "here and now" exchange with the other person: What's going on in our conversation? Am I starting to sound like your boss? Do you wish I'd stop fishing around like this and leave you alone? Or more simply, "What is the single most helpful thing I could do for you right now?"

Dominic's intervention with me was the classic third position question: "*Why* do you think you did what you did? Could there be something else at work, something that is so close to you that it escaped your own radar?"

The "something so close" – the personal script – in my case was yet another aspect of preference – the life-long need for competence – and to be seen to be competent – that is part of the ENTI make-up. This aspect of my personal script has frequently triggered dysfunctional behaviour – such as rushing part of a session because some people in the room are expressing the need to "get on with it", whole others are still struggling with the basic ideas. When working with a group of people, I believe that it is essential to acknowledge where everyone is "at", and then encourage the group to do the same and to take responsibility for helping each other. This is difficult to do,

however, if one's personal script says: "You meet all of the needs of all the people yourself, single-handedly."

(The post-script to the incident was that the manager came back to me, privately, about two days later, and said: "I've been thinking about our conversation the other day. You know, I'm really depressed about it. I just seem to be chasing my tail." So we talked about what it felt like to be chasing your own tail.....)

The use of competency is bigger, in fact, than simply one person's personal script. The larger issue is: How do we all get to be competent at this? Our objective was to generate learning about learning, to create learning situations in which people were not dependent on facilitators but could do what we did, whenever they needed to.

There were many aspects of our practice that we believed we needed to "operationalise" – that is, articulate them to the point where others could understand them and, if they had a mind to, practise them for themselves. We thought that this articulation of our tacit knowledge-in-action would be made easier by the fact that we both enjoyed the exploration of theory and could generally explain *why* we did what we did.

We found it much harder to describe what we did than to explain how or why it worked. For instance, I found it much easier, earlier in this chapter, to explain how active listening works than to describe in detail what the doing of it entails. One could not construct a "how to" manual on the basis of what was set out there. Some of our efforts at articulation have borne fruit – as in the description of personal scripts (see Chapter 3), and the development of the diagnostic pyramid (see Chapter 5), and our elaboration of critical incident analysis (see Chapter 2). Our development of an organisational change model and diagnostic techniques associated with that are examples from another part of our practice which is not explored here.

Where the process of articulation has been limited thus far, we have tried to develop some methods of "coaching" or facilitation which are not dissimilar to those described by Schon (1987) and outlined in the previous chapter. The development of these methods has not been in any way a "behind the scenes" activity, since all have been evolved on-the-job, while working with participants.

The one which has been central to my own practice has been the use of what I call structured interactive dialogue where I frequently take one of the parts myself and use the dialogue to both demonstrate and develop skills in listening, immediacy and constructive confrontation. An example of this in action was mentioned in the story headed "Rebecca" earlier in this chapter.

It is not unusual in these dialogues to have several members of the group take turns in being, for example, the listener and the person being listened to. These dialogues are not role-plays: the data or story being told is always genuine and the interaction an authentic attempt at assisting reflection on the data.

One day, Dominic and I, without discussing the matter, instinctively moved into a process called "doubling" in the terminology of Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969). This is useful when a person who is trying to help – or to tell a story – seems "stuck" and unable to continue. Instead of trying to directly process their stuckness, another person sits next to them and for a period of time (seconds or minutes) takes over the task, without any direct discussion with the person for whom they are doubling (or "understudying"). They might, after a time, alternate, with both people periodically taking on the challenge of listening.

The essential point about doubling is that the people involved are trying to behave as one person, so that the person who is being listened to is not having to contend with

two different approaches at once. Doubling means taking over where the previous person left off, trying to carry forward their thinking and action. This technique requires considerable sensitivity, since those doubling must attend to the data being provided by the person they are doubling for and the person being listened to, if listening is the skill being practised.

One might well ask, "How could anyone do it?" and, "Isn't that technique even harder than the original technique they were trying to learn?" The answer is, that is some curious way, having to double makes one instantly alert to anything that makes it hard to "tune in the radio set" (to continue an earlier metaphor) to one's own or others' data. It is impossible to double unless one is in a seemingly paradoxical state of relaxation and alertness that in the martial arts is associated with the state of being "centred". Those who take on the doubling role and find themselves blocked and unable to continue (or even start, in some cases) learn as much or even more, in some ways, as those who do it and do it well. To experience one's own inability to "tune-in" is to start to discover some potential sources of dysfunction in "tuning in" in other settings.

In order to bring the concept to life, I will quote verbatim from part of a session which was tape-recorded (with the consent of all parties) in the context of another program. During this part of the session, one of the participants is trying to surface one of her "mental models" which has to do with the contribution she is making to strategic marketing within her company. I have labelled the statements "NC" (for my own statements), "A" for the person who is trying to clarify her mental models, and "B" for the person who started trying to help her. In this session, I am "doubling" for "B" at intervals.

A: *So I'm not at all at ease with the concept, but I'm not sure how much of it is just my own problem and how much of it would be a legitimate concern for ... you know, anybody at all who is involved.*

B: *You're a bit confused about what's a reasonable reaction and what's you own private "beef".*

A: *Yes, that's right. You know, I've crossed swords with these guys before and every time it's the same. We go through this same thing every time. They've got this thing about a staged roll-out and everyone knows that we're preaching to the converted on this one. I can't see the point of it, and yet everyone in that group is ... like ... highly committed to it. It feels like "the emperor's new clothes" and I'm the only one who can see his dick!*

B: *You must get frustrated when they don't listen to you.*

A: *We can't even have a calm conversation about it. I seem to quickly get into a state where I'm talking against three people and not a lot's productive. That's why I'm starting to wonder if it's just me. No-one else seems to have a problem with it.*

B: *Gee, I don't know what to suggest. Is there anyone else you can talk to?*

A: *Only my husband. I can't really run around in there saying I disagree with the whole marketing strategy for ... (the product brand name).*

B: *Gee, it's pretty ... uh ... tough, eh?"*

A: *It's dumb. I can't work it out.*

Silence for about thirty seconds.

NC: *There seems like no obvious way to deal with this.*

A: *I've run out of ideas completely. I'm going in circles, and I think I'm making a fool of myself.*

NC: *How do you look foolish?*

A: *Oh, you know, it's uh .. it's a bit undignified to be always nagging about something. I feel like I'm nagging.*

NC: *Here comes ..... ("A") harping away again; never gives up; doesn't understand what's involved.*

B: *Pick, pick, pick. Never happy.*

A: *(Laughs) But you'll be sorry you didn't listen to me. I'll have the last laugh. When you've done all that wrong.*

B: *What will you say to us? "I told you so!"?*

A: *It sounds awful but that's exactly what I feel like saying. It sounds like I'm six, doesn't it? Why can't I be more objective about this?*

B: *What would "objective" be like?*

A: *It would be that I could quote some hard data at them, instead of just appealing to ideas. But there isn't any that I can think of.*

B: *That's a pity. None at all?*

A: *None that I know of.*

B: *What a pity.*

Silence again.

A: *Looks like we're back to square one, here.*

B: *For me, too. I don't know what to suggest.*

NC: *You feel pretty passionate about all this, so it would be hard to just walk away and pretend is doesn't matter. What's driving your conviction? What's the data <u>you</u> respond to?*

A: *Oh, it's really, it's just an intuitive feeling that these guys have got to beat up some enthusiasm for what is really a pretty boring product that's on its last legs anyhow, and is really just tiding us over until we're ready to go with the new generation of these. Which won't be before another eighteen months. If they don't do a bit of flag-waving with a new promotion then everyone'll get to see that they aren't doing much else until the new one comes along. But it's just marking time, really. In the meantime, they all get paid. And well paid.*

NC: *For doing.....?*

A: *Sweet F.A. It's pathetic. We only need one of them, not three of them. It's the waste that gets me. I'm not used to spending money like that.*

B: *So you're a bit envious of them?*

A: *Yeah, envious <u>and</u> nagging. Not a pretty picture, is it? Yet, you know, I'm right. If only I could find a way to make those guys acknowledge me.*

NC: *So we're here, in the room. What would you like us to say?*

A: *I'd like you to at least give me a proper hearing, and include me in some of your meetings. I am product liaison, after all.*

NC: *So we're locking you out. Do you know why?*

A: *Because I'm the new girl on the block and you think I don't know the industry.*

B: *Maybe we don't like the way you've raised the issue with us.*

A: *For God's sake, three of you and one of me. What does it take to get a hearing?*

B: *Have you heard us? You want acknowledgment. Have you given it?*

A: *What's to acknowledge?*

B: *Us.*

NC: *The fact that we care about this product and don't want to see it go out with a whimper, not a bang. We feel passionate, too. Maybe passion's getting in the way for all of us?*

A: *You want me to let go of mine?*

NC: *Not necessarily, but perhaps not assume that your's is the only commitment*

that's been made around here.

A: I'll need to think about that.

This is only part of a much longer session, and it demonstrates the use of a form of dialogue made popular by Fritz Perls (1969) among others. By getting into an imaginary dialogue with the other person/people involved in the issue, there is a chance that the assumptions and other underlying elements of the personal script will be surfaced.

I'm conscious that Dominic himself isn't much revealed in this account. There are no pronouncements or bits of wisdom; just lots of effort, learning to "read" each other at critical moments, to make the facilitation appear seamless, to move as one person. In fact, that's just how its been: an exercise in doubling. Thanks, Dominic.

Summary

This story has been included because it illustrates the way in which practice comes to be developed from knowing-in-action to a more articulated and explicit knowingness. Dominic and I just "did" doubling without previous discussion about it or any awareness that that's what would happen. At the time, we didn't have a label for it, although the writer recognised it when re-visiting the Gestalt literature at a later point.

"Doubling" as a technique also provides a nice illustration of the skill required to track data and one's own awareness at three or four different levels:

- awareness of the data coming from inside oneself;

- awareness of the data coming from the other person (the one being "helped");

- awareness of the data coming from the person with whom one is doubling;

- awareness of the data being generated by the interaction of all three people.

The first part of the story also includes an example of a personal script in action and how lack of awareness of that script on the facilitator's part produced "stuckness" for her and reinforced the "stuckness" of the person she was trying to help.

Chapter 5: Integration and a meeting with "old friends"

Introduction and overview

The intention of the previous chapter was to show something of how one aspect of this writer's praxis was developed, over a period of years, by engagement in the kind of reflection that arises directly out of action, reading and sustained dialogue with others.

In this chapter, the writer tracks the final (at least "final" to the time of writing!) development of the writer's understanding of reflection-based learning.

The chapter follows this sequence:

- a summary of the integration of theory and practice achieved to the end of Chapter 4;

- a description of the next "great leap forward" in the development of the writer's understanding stimulated by the work of Gendlin (1970); that work is offered as a potential source of explanation of the process of reflective learning; similarly, Rogers' (1961) model of the way in which individuals can learn about and recreate aspects of themselves is offered as an elegant description of the process of reflective learning-in-action which also captures the essence of the present writer's "knowing-in-action";

- a description of how the great leap forward was tested and challenged.

Summary of integration of theory and practice to this point

The writer will begin this section by offering a summary of the point her understanding

had reached towards the end of the activities described in the last chapter.

She had come to believe that in an age of discontinuity, the kinds of learning and change processes required of individuals call for the capability to reflect not only on tasks and environments and opportunities "out there", but on one's own behaviour as well, including the factors which drive our actions, albeit in ways that we are not always aware of. She had come to value "third position" reflection as a perspective from which one can try to "see oneself" in action and to understand the impact and causes of that action. She came to appreciate the significance of Demmings' remark (1982) that nothing happens without personal transformation.

She had defined reflection as being about "sense-making" – making the transition from tacit practice, skill and knowledge to explicit acknowledgment, naming and framing of those things. She had seen the application of words, pictures, metaphors and other symbols in sense-making as being as important in the development of self-understanding as it is in the development of praxis.

In her search for appropriate methodologies, she had wanted to develop her own understanding (and practice) of the reflective practitioner, who uses reflection to assist useful learning and change in self and others. She agreed with Martin (1993, p81) that in order to:

> catalyse change, I would have to see beyond cognitive instruction, beyond studies and presentation, to a process of learning more subtle and compassionate than anything I and most of my colleagues in the profession have practised up to now ... the key to the process is self-examination.

She experienced the wisdom of the Gestalt cycle of awareness, seeing in it a map of all the different facets of the reflective act – awareness, feeling, understanding, intent, action and withdrawal. She accepted the completeness of the cycle, carrying with it the implication that experience – however intense, however deeply "felt", or however

mechanical, automatic and repetitive – remains essentially tacit and "unknowable" by self and others unless brought into a cognitive (symbolic) awareness, where it can be acknowledged, "made sense of", shared, enhanced, accepted or opened up to further testing and change by the individual.

She also must declare a concern with approaches to individual and collective learning which suggest that people can somehow, through logic, interrogation, force or persuasion, be quickly confronted with the powerful internal drivers of behaviour (call them mental models, personal scripts or what you will) and be successfully invited to change them. Rather, she saw the surfacing of mental models or personal scripts as being, in Martin's words, an act that is subtle, compassionate, involving lightness of touch, profound respect for the individual and a preparedness and ability to read, accept and meet the other person (or oneself, if one's own self is the focus) where they are, not where, in fantasy, one would like them to be.

The view of personal change arising from Gestalt therapy became an important focus for this writer. She accepted the proposition – and paradox – that one can change only when one is truly oneself, that when we become aware of ourselves at any point in time and fully acknowledge, know, make sense of our "stuckness" and what we really are doing (in Gestalt terms), we open the possibility of making changes. She became keen to learn, enhance, operationalise and share the skills involved in creating that state of self-awareness which Gestalt therapy identifies with readiness for change.

As her head developed understanding of the skills, her practice led her to experience these skills in action, to experience the act of engagement with another as being one of intense concentration, but ultimately one requiring one to have enormous sensitivity, care ("you have to love them": the concept of unconditional positive regard) and timing.

The literature of Gestalt therapy was visited – and in some cases, re-visited – with more thoroughness than is probably reflected in the thesis. It was this literature that clarified for the writer the concept that "knowingness" or the development of meaning implies both being close to that which one seeks to make sense of (even becoming part of it or at one with it in terms of experience) and distancing oneself from it (seeing it in the context of its impact on others and on the self): in Gestalt terms, focussing on both the figure and the ground of the emerging Gestalten (Korb, Gorrell & de Reit, 1989).

In order to further enhance her understanding and practice, this writer re-visited the counselling literature and both read about and practised the skills involved in using dialogue not to get where "I" *want* to be, but where "you" *are*: the skills of attending and active listening, of being intensely aware of one's own internal data and personal scripts, as well as the data being generated by the other person, and by the interaction between self and others. She appreciated that this kind of attending to and active acknowledgment of self and others is in itself a profoundly reflective act, requiring both closeness to (immersion in) and distance from the data of the emerging Gestalten. She experienced the extraordinary challenge of matching one's own responses to those of an other person's as one engages with them – so that interaction sometimes has the lightness of touch that is like (metaphorically speaking) the tenderness of a caress, and at other times involves a more "rough and tumble" kind of dialogue or a dialogue that is like playfulness. She and a colleague attempted the challenging task of working in tandem, through "doubling", and the disciplines associated with that work.

She experienced the challenge of trying to tune into all of one's own data and engaging all of one's self – head, heart, senses and imagination in MBTI terms, the finely honed and adjusted functions of the dominant and auxiliary self, and the uncalibrated and less comfortable functions of the shadow side of self (Jung, 1933).

She came to appreciate the fine line between acceptance and collusion – the moment at

which the facilitator can usefully re-frame the data, or the sense that is being made of it, in ways that help the other to gain the deepest levels of insight into self that open up new and significant possibilities for change.

She learned that being attentive to the data requires a non-heroic orientation, an interest in "bending low to the ground" to experience what seems ordinary and of no importance. She learned that the arts of story telling and listening to stories, of writing and reading stories (experiences) in journals, are a powerful trigger for insight and action. And that the process of reflection is enhanced by the use of metaphor, myth and picture which applies existing wisdom to new situations by its capacity to re-frame what the data suggests and re-invent our capacity for dealing with it.

There were lessons to be learned about the impasse which individuals and teams sometimes get to, unable to move back or forward but "stuck"; and the Gestalt notion of a cycle of attention, energy, engagement and withdrawal which can be interrupted (resulting in "stuckness") at different points, but which demands an even greater need to meet the person or group where they actually are, and to avoid the traps of prematurely "moving them on". The writer understood that "stuckness" can sometimes look like skilled behaviour, but that on closer examination it is more like "skilled incompetence" (Argyris, 1991) that is not only dysfunctional but seals over the possibility of any acknowledgment of its dysfunctional character. She experienced at first hand Senge's (1990) observation that when one prematurely pushes a well-organised but dysfunctional system of behaviour (whether individual or collective), the system (person, team, organisation) pushes back even harder.

And the writer learned, or course, that reflection and the sense-making it produces, continually needs to be carried forward into action, where "sense" is tested, confirmed, modified, enriched, extended, challenged or changed.

These ideas or "themes" of the writer represent the kind of insight that emerges from sustained self-reflection on one's own behaviour and practice as well as bringing together of a number of strands of other people's thinking and practice. The process of bringing together and integrating ideas and practice was messy, non-linear, both a source of misery and a source of exhilaration. And at the end of the day, she is conscious that even after all the words are on the page, after every effort has been made to articulate and operationalise what was formerly elusive and tacit, sometimes a small hard core of complexity remains, something which requires the touch of a master craftsman or artist, and which can only be witnessed or felt, but not described or explained.

The writer once had the experience of watching and experiencing Zurko Moreno (the wife of J.L. Moreno, to whom is attributed the invention of the concepts of sociometry, psychodrama, socio-drama and role-play) work with two hundred people in the creation of a meaningful piece of psychodramatic work. The skill with which she engaged her own intuition and imagination, as well as the intuition of others, in creating and reading the data of interaction defies description.

Schon (1987) has suggested (see Chapter 3) there are areas of "knowing-in-action" that are in any event very difficult to articulate, and which are accessed by the "feel" or experience of actually doing whatever it is.

The writer's "great leap forward" in the development of her understanding

Nonetheless, this writer's "need to know" and to articulate her understanding did result in a further – and major – step in the development of her understanding.

She was aware, at this point in the journey, of being "on the brink" of some further insight into the whole business of reflection. It would be misleading to describe this as

an orderly and logical development of a train of thought. It was more as though a major bit of the jigsaw suddenly fell into place. In this section, the writer attempts to track how this came about and the substance and significance of this latest development in her understanding. She begins by continuing the description of the core ingredients in Gestalt thinking.

For the Gestalt therapist, the target for change is not the problem presented by the person. Rather, the therapist observes the person as he or she describes the problem and looks for the underlying process (or personal script, to use the writer's own term) by which the person maintains the state of confusion, or impasse ("stuckness"), uncertainty, disempowerment or lack of perceived competence which they – or others – are aware of. Korb et al (1989, p71) describe the therapeutic stance as being one in which all one does is attend, and attempt to discover what the person is *DOING*. This will be as interesting or more interesting than the *CONTENT* of what the person is saying. *"DOING"* includes how the person is sitting, breathing, obvious tensions about their body, how they are speaking, voice tone, speech patterns, gestures. One cannot attend to all of these things, simultaneously, but as attention is maintained, some feature (figure) stands out from the ground of the Gestalt, and the processes which exhibit what the person is doing become apparent. If no clues of process emerge from the person's presence alone, or how they express themselves, one will generally discover what the person is *DOING* within the situation they are describing.

It is not enough, however, for the facilitator or helper to notice what the client is doing: the client must notice it and experience it, too. In fact, the invitation offered by the Gestalt therapist to the client is to work through the cycle of interaction between oneself and one's environment that was described in Chapter 4 during the account of the encounter with Alan. This cycle describes a flow and ebb of energy as the individual becomes progressively aware of sensation, attaches feeling and meaning (symbolic understanding) to it, mobilises their intentions toward it, takes action which results in

full contact with and experience of the situation, leading to satisfaction and withdrawal.

For the Gestalt therapist, it is not enough for the person to make sense of their situation, to complete the cycle; they must say, do, or feel whatever is necessary for the unfinished business to be finished. As Korb et al (1989, p72) point out, Gestalt therapy is an existential therapy, not simply a verbal or interpretive one. The person is facilitated in saying clearly what needs to be said, not to any real person in his or her life, but to his or her image of that person; but talking per se is not enough: the person is facilitated in allowing himself or herself to experience whatever feeling, thoughts, or actions have been blocked, at whatever stage of the cycle they have been blocked, thus completing the complete cycle of the Gestalt.

In terms of application to practice, these ideas have the potential to push the writer's practice to the limit of her skill. Not only can the search for sense-making become an essentially cognitive act for this writer (and therefore, potentially, for her clients also) with feelings left out of the picture altogether, but in her experience it takes real skill to meet people wherever they happen to be in the cycle (which might be before or after the point at which "sense-making" is important); it takes even more skill and patience to avoid the trap of trying to move them on before they are ready (i.e. before they have experienced and acknowledged for themselves where they are up to). The capacity to do this implies considerable sensitivity and flexibility in the facilitator's own repertoire. If the facilitator is "stuck" in any part of the cycle herself, she will find it potentially difficult to work effectively with someone who is "stuck" somewhere else.

The challenging questions of how do I do all this in practice? and how do I facilitate it effectively? will be picked up again in the next section of this chapter. For the moment, the writer will concentrate on the leap forward in her understanding. Because the Gestalt cycle did trigger a leap forward in the development of that understanding. The Gestalt cycle potentially offers us a description of how reflection works – the full cycle

of connection with awareness, feeling, understanding and action. But it doesn't tell us why it works.

This issue takes us into a different plane in the consideration of reflection. We are contemplating not just how reflection works (a description of the process) but why it works (explanation). Most of what has been contained in this thesis so far could be described as description of reflection at work – in research, in learning, in theory and in practice. So far, there has been no attempt at explanation. Explanation is not only important for its own sake, as representing a higher order of thinking about the phenomenon in question, but because in thinking about the explanation we might get some clues about how to make our processes work more effectively. In this specific instance, it might also be helpful because what we are doing seems so inherently complex: trying to find useful ways to think about ourselves so that we can develop, learn or change some part of what we do.

In her search for explanation, this writer returned to a work she had first read over twenty years before: Gendlin's (1970) *A Theory of Personality Change*. Gendlin (1970) commented over twenty five years ago that we lack a theory of experience, while Bergin (1970) commented that we need a methodology for introspection. While Gendlin and Bergin were reacting to an American behaviourist tradition which had effectively banned the contents of subjective experience from the practice of psychology (defined as a science), arguably not much has changed since then. We still lack agreed methodologies which can be readily accessed by those interested in self-reflection of the kind which comes from "third position", and which addresses what this writer has called "personal scripts".

Gendlin (1970) has offered a model of what might be happening which is helpful and on which others can readily build. He differentiates three elements in the process of human experience: that which is unconscious or outside of immediate awareness

(although it may once have been in awareness), that which is in our awareness but which has not been symbolised by us, and that which has been symbolised in words or pictures.

He suggests that a great deal of our day-to-day experiencing is within our awareness but is "tacit" in the sense that no verbal or other symbols have been attached to it. He calls this kind of experience "felt meaning", and includes in it the inward sense of our body, its tension, its well-being. It is essentially sensory, visceral, intuitive – and sometimes – emotional experience. Before symbolisation, these "felt" meanings are tacit, implicit, incomplete, pre-conceptual, awaiting the attachment of symbols, which can "organise" or "make sense" of them in many different ways. In the tradition of existential thinking, our feelings are "possibilities", possible actions in the world.

Because felt meanings are incomplete, to say that something is *tacit* does not mean that it is in the same form as explicit, only hidden. It means that it is not yet formed, and therefore amenable to many different ways of being formed. Explicit meanings are not hidden conceptual units, waiting to be discovered – they are created at the moment when that which is tacit is formed and completed by the attachment of symbols.

When symbols are attached to them, our felt meanings – which can include perceptions, judgements, wishes, intentions and feelings – take a new, completed form. This notion of completion sits well with the Gestalt awareness cycle (see Figure 3) and its notion of non-interrupted contact and engagement with each stage in the cycle.

When this explanatory model is applied to the process of reflection, we can make more sense of (reflect more deeply upon) that act. Gendlin suggests, for example, that in the process of reflection we are searching around for ways of satisfactorily completing our felt (unsymbolised) meanings. When we find this completion, by the attachment of the written word or other symbol, meaning has become different but explicit.

While there are many potential ways of completing felt meanings, in practice, Gendlin suggests, only a relatively few will actually complete the meaning in a way that feels satisfactory to their owner:

> ... recall how often ... the client struggles for the exactly right way to stating something he feels. Many statements may be rejected as "not quite it", even though conceptually they seem to be the same as what he finally asserts is "exactly it". That exactly right statement has a powerful experiential effect. The person may visibly relax, exhale deeply, and feel released and deeply relieved, often despite the fact that the statement asserts something awful... Not any and all concepts or words will do. Only exactly these words have this effect of experiential movement (Gendlin, 1970, p79).

Without this act of connection and completion, words are not useful. We call it rationalising or intellectualising or externalising if an individual talks and explains without the direct participation of his ongoing felt meaning (his experience); we say that the person is "disconnected".

When connection and completion are effected, the person's experience, in Gendlin's model, is carried forward and changed.

> Rogers at first found that even if the therapist did nothing more than to rephrase the client's communication – that is to say, if the therapist clearly showed that he was receiving and exactly understanding the client's moment-by-moment communications – a very deep and self-propelled change process began and continued in the client. Something happens ... when he is understood in this way. Some change takes place in what he momentarily confronts. Something releases. He then has something else, further, to say; and if this, again, is received and understood, something still further emerges which the individual would not even have thought of (nor was capable of thinking), has not such a sequence of expressions and responses taken place.
>
> Rogers next found that if he aimed to conceptualise exactly what the client now wishes to communicate, and if he kept this aim visible and known to the client *(writer's note: this last is the part of the process of immediacy described earlier in this chapter)*, he could formulate the client's present message much more deeply and accurately than the client had done. Perhaps the client gave a long series of externalised reports of the incidents and his generally angry reactions. The therapist, after listening, could sense what I now call the felt meaning. Thus, in response to some long situational reports the therapist might say, "It frightens you to think that you are helpless when that sort of thing happens."

> Rogers found that, while interpretations, deductions, and conceptual explanations were useless and usually resisted, the *exact* referring to the client's own momentarily felt meaning was almost always *welcome* to the client and seemed to release him into deeper and further self-expression and awareness (Gendlin, 1970, p136).

According to Gendlin, the process of completing felt meanings is simply that – an ongoing process of interaction between felt experiencing and symbols. It is not one of finding an explicit meaning which directly equates to an implicit or tacit one. Completion is – paradoxically – a creative act, not one of "matching", because the act of completion not only forms or adds something that was not there before, it creates new possibilities for feeling, symbolising and acting. At the same time, much of our experiencing is essentially an ongoing *interaction* between feeling and symbols.

In tracking how the individual makes conceptual sense of (develops verbal concepts to describe) their own experience, we are not tracking the conceptual connection of one set of symbols (words or constructs) with another. Between each concept, there is an intervening step(s) during which the symbol completes a felt meaning, thus creating the possibility of a new symbolic connection which does not just flow "logically" from the previous symbol but from the possibilities inherent in the felt meaning.

This contrasts with other thinking processes, when we move directly from concept to concept by conceptual implication. This is likely to be the character of our thinking when we are engaging with abstract ideas or things that are not part of our immediate sensing. Gendlin's essential point is an interesting one -that if we are interested in *personal change*, it can only happen through an interaction involving symbols and the "felt meaning" element in personal experience.

This writer finds Gendlin's model as stimulating in 1994 as she did in 1974, obviously because it connects, as a set of symbols, with some of her own felt meanings! It certainly helps, however, to explain why some of the techniques described in the next

section actually work. Take, for example, the process of *focussing* in which the facilitator attempts to add value to the other person's efforts to interpret or make sense of their experience, by being increasingly concrete and specific about the content of what is being communicated; or by incrementally adding meaning to what has been acknowledged or recognised by the other person; or by being immediate about the interaction between the facilitator and the other person.

Focussing is a continuous process in which symbols interact more and more helpfully with felt meaning. Attentive focussing thus makes it possible for an individual to surface and make sense of feelings which were previously embarrassing, confusing, ambiguous, unfocused, but *real*: "I know it makes no sense, but I think I'm actually frightened of her." Combined with *respect*, focussing makes it easier for the individual to get past his or her own defence mechanisms and attempt some rough conceptualisation of what's going on at the level of felt meaning. (We talk about people "getting in touch" with themselves.) In the manner that Rogers describes (1961), while the concept might be foggy, the feeling (not necessarily emotion) that triggered it might be experienced much more directly, without being suppressed or filtered out.

As felt meaning becomes sharper, the anxiety or discomfort often associated with being "touchy-feely" often diminishes or disappears. Felt (aware) experience becomes more acceptable and though unpleasant at times, the experience of experiencing it is itself a source of anxiety. At this stage, symbolising might be very inadequate, the person might talk about "feeling like this", or "it", when talking about their own experience, but they are now talking about it.

Gendlin describes several phases in the process of focussing, such as "unfolding", when we might have both cognitive and emotional recognition of the "good sense" of our previously unidentified and irksome feelings. "Of course", we say over and over, "Of course". During unfolding:

> a whole vast multiplicity of implicit aspects in the person's functioning and dysfunctioning is always involved. For, when a direct referent of experiencing "opens up", much more change has occurred than the cognitive realisation of this or that. This is most dramatically evident when, after the "unfolding", the individual still sees no way out. He says, "At least I know what it is now, but how will I ever change or deal with it?" Yet, during the following days ... it turns our that he is already different, that the quality of the problem has changed, and his behaviour has been different. And, as for a good explanation of all this resolution ... "well, it just seems all right now." There is a global change in the whole manner of experiencing in this regard ... only sometimes does *what* is unfolded lead to a solution in an explicable way. More often, deep global feeling change occurs as one unfolds the direct referent, even when it seems to open into something which sounds worse and more hopeless than one had expected. Whether or not some specific resolution is noticeable, the change appears to be broad and global. It is not just this problem resolved, or that trait changed, but a change in many areas and respects. We can say that the broad multiplicity of aspects which are implicit in any felt meaning are all of them changed – thus the global change. Or we can say that meanings are aspects of the experiencing process and that the very *manner* of experiencing changes, hence also the quality of all of its meanings (Gendlin, 1970, p146).

In this passage, the writer believes that Gendlin has offered an explanatory framework which elegantly ties together all the "bits" of her emerging personal understanding or theory: the power of attending behaviour; the paradox of change (to "move on" in understanding one must first "go in" to self and experience); the concept of leverage (small subtle changes in personal scripts which have "global" consequences); the importance of the act of reflection itself, as a means of developing meaning and transforming that which was tacit into the explicit; and the value of metaphor as a profoundly enriching element in symbolisation.

Gendlin has much more to say which this writer finds profoundly "sense-making": for example, his descriptions of immediacy, of presentness, of the "richness of fresh detail" (when we reframe, re-symbolise, felt meaning that had previously locked us into dysfunctional patterns of behaviour, including interaction with others that failed to attend to all the detail inherent in the situation, that diminished both parties because it left out very many facets of the other person and the uniqueness of our interaction). He describes the "re-constituting" of experience which had previously been pushed outside

awareness (through denial, repression, disconnection). When individuals are able to glimpse, re-constitute and then *carry forward* their own, previously disconnected or unacknowledged, felt meaning, without reliance on interaction with others, and when that felt meaning relates to themselves, they are engaging in the ultimate in third position reflection, what Isaacs (1993) called self-reflective "triple-loop learning".

If a thesis can be said to have a "high point" in its manufacture, then this is that point: a sense, for the writer, that we have finally got to the heart of the matter, laid bare the thinking and the thinking behind the thinking. The writer has come full circle from 1974 to 1994 and back again. In T.S. Eliot's words: "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." It would be tempting to put aside the pen at this moment, and say "there it is". However, there is more.

<u>How the "great leap forward" included another leap backwards: the contribution of Carl Rogers</u>

It will have become apparent, from reading the previous section, that in order to take a "great leap forward" in her understanding, this writer had to take a leap backwards in time to re-visit, re-discover – and for the first time, perhaps, really understand – the wisdom from the counselling literature which she had been exposed to in the course of completing her Master's Degree in Occupational Psychology in the mid 1970's. This re-visiting of “old friends” in the literature not only refreshed and enriched her thinking, but made her aware of how little of this wisdom had actually been understood and effectively integrated into her practice at the time when it was first encountered.

Rogers' (1961) description of the way in which individuals can insightfully learn about and recreate aspects of themselves was particularly interesting to read, since his articulation of the key stages in the development of self-awareness, experience and

behaviour marries up very well with the explanatory theory offered by Gendlin (1970).

Rogers brings to life and describes what is happening to the individual as he or she moves through the psychological change process which Gendlin subsequently tried to explain. The present writer suggests that in doing this, Rogers also provides us with an articulate description of what happens as one moves progressively through deeper stages of reflection upon self. In reading the words of Rogers again, after so long an interval, she was struck by how powerfully and accurately Rogers captures and makes explicit aspects of her own knowing-in-action which had remained tacit.

Rogers (1961, pp132-155) describes the stages in the change process in the following way. In the first stage there is an unwillingness to communicate about self; communication is only about things external to self. As a result, feelings and personal meanings are neither recognised nor owned, and personal constructs (to borrow Kelly's (1955) helpful term) are extremely rigid. At this stage close and communicative dialogue is construed as irrelevant or even dangerous; no problems are recognised or perceived; there is no desire to change; and there is much blockage of internal communication.

In the second stage, expression begins to flow more freely in regard to non-self topics; but problems are still perceived as external to self and there is no sense of personal responsibility in problems. Feelings are described in such a way that the person doesn't "own" them (may talk about "what happens to you" when they mean "what happens to me"; or may talk about feelings as though they were objects in the past. When feelings are exhibited, they are not recognised as such. Experiencing is bound by the structure of the past, making it difficult for the person to experience something new or unfamiliar. The person finds it difficult to differentiate personal meanings and feelings except in very limited and global ways; contradictions may be expressed, but with little recognition of them as contradictions.

In the third stage there is freer flow of expression about the self as an object, and much more expression about or description of feelings and personal meanings occurring in the past. However, there is still very little acceptance of feelings; for the most part feelings are revealed as something shameful, bad, or abnormal, or unacceptable in other ways. When feelings are exhibited they are sometimes recognised as feelings at the time; however, most experiencing is described as in the past, or as somewhat remote from the self. While personal constructs remain rigid, they may be recognised as constructs, not external facts. Similarly differentiation of feelings and meanings is slightly sharper and less global, than in previous stages, and contradiction in experiences may be recognised; however, personal choices are often seen as ineffective.

In the fourth stage the person describes more intense feelings of the "not-now-present" variety; and more feelings are experienced in the immediate present, sometimes breaking through almost against the client's wishes, and there is distrust and fear of this when it happens. There is still little open acceptance of feelings, but experiencing is less bound by the structure of the past, is less remote, and may occasionally occur with little postponement. There is a loosening in the way experience is construed; there are some discoveries of personal constructs; there is the definite recognition of some of these as constructs; and there is a beginning questioning of their validity. Feelings, constructs, personal meanings are increasingly differentiated with some tendency toward seeking exactness of symbolisation. Concerns about contradictions and incongruence between experience and self are acknowledged and there are feelings of self responsibility in problems, though such feelings vacillate. Though close dialogue still seems dangerous, the person risks him or herself, relating to some small extent on a feeling basis.

In the fifth stage, feelings are expressed freely as in the present; and are very close to being fully experienced; they "bubble up", "seep through" in spite of the fear and

distrust which the person feels at experiencing them with fullness and immediacy. Although there is surprise and fright, rarely pleasure, at the feelings which "bubble" through, there is an increasing ownership of self-feelings, and a desire to be these, to be the "real me". Experiencing is loosened, no longer remote, and frequently occurs with little postponement. The ways in which experience is construed are much loosened; there are many fresh discoveries of personal constructs as constructs; and a critical examination and questioning of these. There is a strong and evident tendency toward exactness in differentiation of feelings and meanings; and an increasingly clear facing of contradictions and inconsistencies in experience. There is an increasing quality of acceptance of self-responsibility for problems being faced, and a concern as to how far he/she has contributed; there are increasingly freer dialogues within the self, and improvement in and reduced blockage of internal communication.

In the sixth stage, a feeling which has previously been "stuck", has been inhibited in its process quality, is experienced with immediacy now. A feeling flows to its full result, and a present feeling is directly experienced with immediacy and richness. This immediacy of experiencing, and the feeling which constitutes its content, are accepted; this is not something which is to be denied, feared or struggled against. Self as an object tends to disappear, and experiencing, at this stage, takes on a real process quality. The incongruence between experience and awareness is vividly experienced as it disappears into congruence. Differentiation of experiencing is sharp and basic; and in this stage, there are no longer "problems", external or internal; the client is living, subjectively, a phase of his problem, it is not an object.

In the seventh stage, new feelings are experienced with immediacy and richness of detail, both in the helping relationship and outside. There is a growing and continuing sense of acceptant ownership of these changing feelings, a basic trust in his/her own process. Experiencing has lost almost completely its structure-bound aspects and become process experiencing – that is, the situation is experienced and interpreted in its

newness, not in the past. The self becomes increasingly simply the subjective and reflexive awareness of experiencing; the self is much less frequently a perceived object and much more frequently something confidently felt in process. Personal constructs are tentatively reformulated, to be validated against further experience, but even then, to be held loosely. Internal communication is clear, with feelings and symbols well matched, and fresh terms for new feelings. There is the experiencing of effective choice of new ways of being.

While some (for example, Schein, 1993) would undoubtedly be uncomfortable with the focus of this statement on the accessing of emotions, and while the present writer's practice could not be described as intensively therapeutic in a clinical sense, she believes that these words of Rogers provide us with a good working description of what is potentially involved when nice, "normal" people engage in the kind of self-reflection which has the power to question deeply entrenched personal scripts, including the self-sealing defensive routines described so eloquently by Argyris (1991).

<u>The development of technique: finding out more about how others do it and experiencing a praxis challenge</u>

A key practice challenge for the present writer, arising from the "great leap forward", is to take models and explanations of reflective learning – and how to facilitate it – developed in the context of therapeutic work (the Gestaltists, Gendlin & Rogers (1961)) and apply them in the context of management development which is not happening in a therapeutic context.

While convinced – both intellectually and through experience – of the relevance of these frameworks in facilitating deep levels of reflection, the writer has been a little disconcerted by the fact that she had reached back so far into the historical literature to help develop her own understanding, practice and praxis.

Moreover, as already suggested in Chapter 3, she was a little concerned by a paucity of detailed references to these frameworks in the more recent literature on the techniques used to facilitate reflection, inquiry and dialogue of the kind acknowledged to be important in generative learning.

At the risk of seeming to retreat yet again into the literature, the writer believes it is important to do so, for two reasons: firstly, because that is what she did in reality, and this is an account of what really happened; and secondly, because in re-visiting the literature, the writer's thinking was given a bit of a jolt. At this point, the literature provided a test and a challenge to both understanding and practice.

To begin with, the return to the contemporary literature was, if anything, comforting and stimulating. As also reported in Chapter 3, many writers and practitioners are convinced of the importance of generative learning and in the techniques – including reflection – needed to produce it. Thus Isaacs remarks:

> Given the nature of global and institutional problems, thinking alone at whatever level of leadership is no longer adequate. The problems are too complex, the interdependencies too intricate, and the consequences of isolation and fragmentation too devastating. Human beings everywhere are being forced to develop their capacity to think together – to develop collaborative thought and coordinated action... According to Alan Webber, former editor of the Harvard Business Review, conversation is the means by which people share and often develop what they know. He says that the most important work in the new economy is creating conversation (Isaacs, 1993, p24).

Dialogue is defined by Isaacs as:

> a discipline of collective thinking and inquiry, a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it... As people learn to perceive, to inquire into, and allow transformation of the ... patterns of individual thinking and acting ... they may discover entirely new levels of insight and forge substantive and, at times, dramatic changes in behaviour (Isaacs, 1993, p25).

He observes that our standard way of thinking suggests that co-ordinated action occurs when different people reach a shared agreement and then create a plan of action. Dialogue suggests that some kinds of co-ordinated action do not require this sort of rational planning at all.

> In fact, some of the most powerful forms of co-ordination may come through participation in unfolded meaning, which might even be perceived differently by different people. A flock of birds suddenly taking flight from a tree reveals the potential co-ordination of dialogue: this is movement all at once, a wholeness and listening together that permits individual differentiation but is still highly inter-connected (Isaacs, 1993, p25).

Isaacs observes that dialogue comes from two Greek roots, *dia* and *logos*, suggesting "meaning flowing through". He defines dialogue as *a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties* that comprise *everyday* experience. In dialogue, people gradually learn to suspend their defensive exchanges and further, to probe into the underlying reasons for why those exchanges exist. This probing into defences is not the central purpose of a dialogue session:

> the central purpose is simply to establish a field of genuine meeting and inquiry, a setting in which people can allow a free flow of meaning and vigorous exploration of the collective background of their thought, their personal predisposition, the nature of their shared attention, and the rigid features of their individual and collective assumptions. The practice of dialogue may require us, however, to focus on uncovering and inquiring into the feedback loop between our internal interpretive structures (our tendency to name events in certain ways) which then influence the world and (eventually) our internal structures (Isaacs, 1993, p31).

Isaacs suggests that successful dialogue not only generates double-loop learning ("What are alternate ways of seeing this situation that could free me to act more effectively?") but triple-loop learning which generates the question: "What is leading me and others to have a predisposition to learn in this way at all? Why these goals?" Isaacs puts the proposition that the mindfulness embodied in dialogue that generates triple-loop learning:

> involves awareness of the living experience of thinking, not reflection after the fact about it. For us to gain insight into the nature of our tacit thought, we must

> somehow learn to watch or experience it, in action. This work would require a form of collective attention and learning. Dialogue's purpose is to create a setting where conscious collective mindfulness can be maintained (Isaacs, 1993, p31).

The present writer finds a great similarity between the process of reflection on thinking described here and the process of development of reflection on self quoted at length from Rogers (1961) in the previous section of this chapter.

All of this requires, as Isaacs concedes, a new mode of paying attention, to be able to perceive, as they arise, the assumptions which are taken for granted, the flow of the polarisation of opinions, the rules for acceptable and unacceptable conversation, and the methods for managing differences.

Isaacs' own advice is to suspend assumptions and uncertainties; observe the observer; listen to your listening; slow down the inquiry; be aware of thought, and befriend polarisation.

He also offers us a model for the development of "cool inquiry", which entails the conscious creation of environments or "containers" which define the field of inquiry. The first container asks that people not only participate in inquiry and debate, but observe and reflect on the kinds of conversations they are having. There is no attempt to change those conversations, simply to observe them.

The second container asks that people explore the range of assumptions that are brought into the inquiry and debate. They are asked to evaluate them, to see the issues as being not simply "out there" but something that they have created themselves. They might be asked to produce a map of their conflict, and to invent some collective and personal "rules" for dialogue.

The result, in Isaacs' words, is that people may then avoid taking an internal "role" about any position; for example, not panic and withdraw, not choose to fight, not categorise things as "this" or "that" but listen and inquire, "What is the meaning of this?" They do not listen just to each other, but to themselves. They ask: "Where am I listening from? What is the disturbance going on in me (and others)? What can I learn if I slow things down and inquire (to seek within)?"

The third container produces a "cool" environment in which people inquire together as a whole, applying their "rules".

> Inquiry within this phase of the container is subtle, people here can become sensitive to the cultural "programs" for thinking and acting that they have unwittingly accepted as true... While people participate, they also begin to watch the session in a new way... People become sensitive to the ways in which the conversation is affecting all the participants in the group. In particular, they can begin to look for the embodied manifestations of their thoughts... This phase can be playful and penetrating. Yet is also leads to another crisis. People ... come to understand and feel the impact that holding fragmented ways of thinking has had on them, their organisations, and their culture. They sense their separateness. While people may understand intellectually that they have had limits to their vision, they may not yet have experienced the fact of their isolation. Such awareness brings pain – both from loss of comforting beliefs and from the exercise of new cognitive and emotional muscles (Isaacs, 1993, p37).

The fourth container, which is reached if the previous crisis can be navigated, opens up a new level of awareness. Isaacs is quoted in full here:

> People begin to know consciously that they are participating in a pool of common meaning because they have sufficiently explored each other's views. They still may not agree, but their thinking takes on an entirely different rhythm and pace. At this point, the distinction between memory and thinking becomes apparent. People may find it hard to talk together using the rigid categories of previous understanding. The net of their existing thought is not fine enough to begin to capture the subtle and delicate understandings that begin to emerge. This too may be familiar or disorienting. People may find that they do not have adequate words and fall silent. Yet the silence is not an empty void, but one replete with richness. Rumi, a 13th century Persian poet, captures this experience:
>
> Out beyond ideas of rightdoing
> and wrongdoing

> There is a field
>
> I will meet you there
>
> When the soul lies down in that grass
> The world is too full to talk about
>
> In this experience, the world is too full to talk about; too full to use language to analyse it. Yet words can also be evocative, creating narratives that convey richness of meaning. Though we may have few words for such experiences, dialogue raises the possibility of speech that clothes subtle meaning instead of words merely pointing towards it. I call this kind of experience "metalogue" or "meaning flowing with". Metalogue reveals a conscious, intimate, and subtle relationship between the structure and content of an exchange and its meaning. The medium and the message are linked: Information from the process conveys as much meaning as the content of the words exchanged. The group does not "have" meaning, in other words, it <u>is</u> its meaning. This kind of exchange entails learning to think and speak together for the creation of break-through levels of thought, and to know the aesthetic beauty of shared speech. Such loosening of rigid thought patterns frees energy that now permits new levels of intelligence and creativity in the container (Isaacs, 1993, p38).

This is tantalising stuff – and to the present writer, bewitching in the prospect it offers. Although not having the same eloquence with words, she can identify with the picture Isaacs paints, glimpse it through the trees and even make associations to large and small group experiences she has had herself.

Isaacs, however, is very light on for detail as to how this state of dialogue is achieved, although he does refer at a couple of points to the need for superb facilitation skills. We are left to guess at the process through which these containers are created and the skills used to enact them by the individuals who make up the group.

Like Isaacs, Schein (1993, p42) is in no doubt about the need for dialogue, suggesting that all problem-solving groups should begin in a dialogue format to facilitate the building of sufficient common ground and mutual trust, and to make it possible to tell what is really on one's mind." He observes, however, that, "some proponents have made it sound like a most esoteric experience. If dialogue is to be helpful to organisational processes, it must be seen as accessible to all of us. Unfortunately, abstract description does not help accessibility. As we all know, "the devil is in the

details" (Schein, 1993, p43). He continues:

> I became specifically preoccupied with the question of how dialogue was different from good face-to-face communication of the sort we learn about in group dynamics and human relations workshops. The difference does not become clear until one actually experiences the dialogue setting. Then, however, the difference is obvious and can be described unambiguously.
>
> Most communication and human relations workshops emphasise active listening, by which is meant that one should pay attention to all the communication channels – the spoken words, the body language, tone of voice, and emotional content. One should learn to focus initially on what the other person is saying, rather than on one's own intended response. In contrast, dialogue focuses on getting in touch with underlying assumptions (especially our own assumptions) that automatically determine when we choose to speak and what we choose to say. Dialogue is focussed more on the thinking process and how our perceptions and cogitations are performed by our past experiences. The assumption here is that if we become more conscious of how our *thought* process works, we will think better, collectively, and communicate better. An important goal of dialogue is to enable *the group* to reach a higher level of consciousness and creativity through the gradual creation of a shared set of meanings and a "common" thinking process.
>
> Active listening plays a role in this process, but is not the central focus or purpose. In fact, I discovered that I spent a lot more time in *self-analysis*, attempting to understand what *my own assumptions were*, and was relatively less focussed on actively listening to others. Feelings and all of the other dimensions of communication are important. Eventually, dialogue participants do "listen actively" to each other, but the path for getting there is quite different.
>
> In the typical sensitivity training workshop, we explore relationships through "opening up" and sharing, through giving and receiving feedback, and through examining of all the *emotional* problems of communication. In dialogue, however, we explore all the complexities of *thinking and language*. We discover how arbitrary our basic categories of thought and perception are, and, thereby, become conscious of imperfections or bias in our basic *cognitive* processes (Schein, 1993, p43).

Schein offers us a step by step account of how to start dialogue:

> In all of the groups that I have observed, initiated by William Isaacs, Peter Senge, or myself, the facilitator started by arranging the setting and then describing the concept. In each case, the group could understand the essence sufficiently to begin the conversation. The key to this understanding is to link dialogue to other experiences we have had that felt like real communication.
>
> The role of the facilitator can be characterised in terms of the following kinds of activities:
>
> Organise the physical space to be as nearly a circle as possible. Whether or not

> people are seated at a table or tables is not as important as the sense of equality that comes from sitting in a circle;
>
> Introduce the general concept, then ask everyone to think about an experience of dialogue in the sense of "good communication" in their past;
>
> Ask people to share with their neighbour what the experience was and to think about the characteristics of that experience (this works because people are relating very concrete experiences, not abstract concepts);
>
> Ask group members to share what it was in such past experiences that made for good communication and write these characteristics on a flip chart;
>
> Ask the group to reflect on these characteristics by having each person in turn talk about his/her reactions;
>
> Let the conversation flow naturally once everyone has commented (this requires one and a half to two hours or more);
>
> Intervene as necessary to clarify or elucidate, using concepts and data that illustrate the problems of communication (some of these concepts are spelled out below);
>
> Close the session by asking everyone to comment in whatever way they choose (Schein, 1993, pp44-45).

Finally, he offers us a map of the different ways of talking together, some helpful and some not (see Figure 4).

In the previous chapter (see "Finding some limits"), the writer has already expressed her concern at the literature's general "briskness" about the business of double-position reflection. Her first reaction to reading the articles of both Isaacs and Schein was, frankly, one of turmoil and envy. How come these guys make it sound so *easy*? Where is all the effort at attending, listening, incrementally adding meaning, working through the emotional accompaniments? How come they are all so *well-behaved*? To be fair to Isaacs, what he describes in some of the groups he has worked in does not sound like a Sunday School picnic but more like an all-in fight! But Schein's group sounds like a well-behaved group in a school room, this writer thought, followed closely by that note of envy, "I could be so lucky!"

It is probably going too far to say that this was a crisis of confidence, but it certainly

gave the writer pause for thought, given the development of her own understanding and practice.

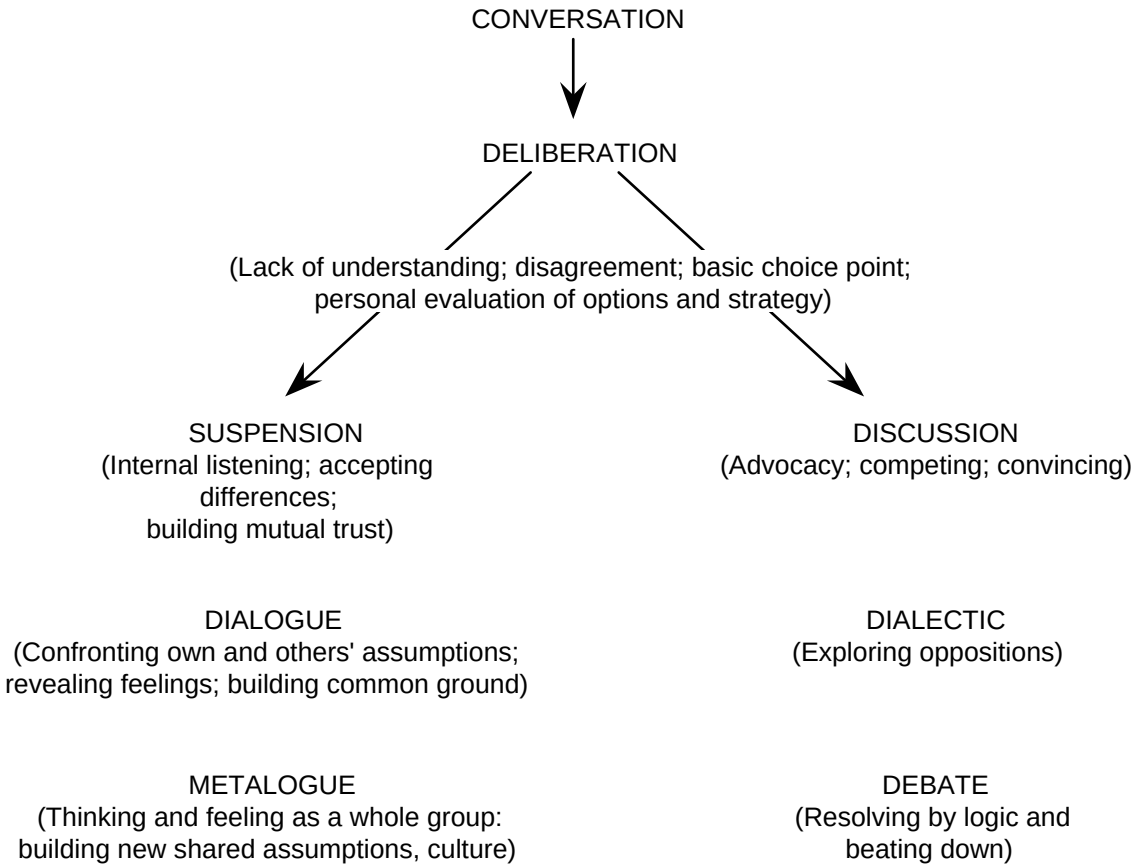


Figure 4: Ways of talking together (From Schein, 1993, p46)

In any event, the strength of her reaction certainly forced the writer to re-examine some of her own thinking and to frame some questions. Is there really such a difference between what I do and what Senge, Isaacs and Schein do? Are we talking about the same things? Am I operating more in the therapeutic mode than I had realised?

In answer to these questions, the writer has concluded that there is a difference between what they are doing and describing and what the writer is doing and describing. They are describing group processes in which the task of the group – to engage in reflection of a particular kind – has been deliberately framed as part of setting up the exercise in the first instance, and in which the ground rules or containers have been explicitly negotiated at the start. Moreover, those containers specifically regulate the way in

which emotional reaction will be dealt with – by exclusion or some way of "coding it". If we were to relate this process of containment to Gendlin's (1970) model, the dialogue which Schein describes is of a more abstract kind, essentially disconnected from experience of self – or from much immediate, felt experience of any kind.

Now the writer is conscious that she, too, does some of these things. She offers and models some techniques for facilitating self reflection which are described a little later. She does not, however, rule out the possibility of emotional reaction through the process. So is that what makes the difference? She believes that there is one other crucial difference, and that is that these writers have framed their activities as exercises in tracking and surfacing collective thinking, whereas she frames hers as an exercise in assisting an individual to track and surface their individual thinking, with the help of a facilitator or learning team.

This is not to say that the present writer never engages in the kind of activity described by Isaacs and Schein, but that their activity serves a different purpose – the clarification, development or creation of new visions, the solving of collective problems, the challenging of organisational "mind sets". The road to individual change and learning, she believes, is a different one, requiring different but at times related disciplines and approaches. In her view, there is a great deal of difference between asking an individual to examine their own scripts (including the filters through which they see the world) and asking them to track the surfacing and development of collective ones which – though important – are just that bit more visible because, once pointed out, one can observe other people "doing it", even if one has difficulty in observing it in oneself.

There *was* one other difference that is critical: it would probably make a *big* difference to walk into a room and be announced as Ed Schein, William Isaacs or Peter Senge...! Nita Cherry doesn't have quite the same ring to it. This is not just a throw-away line prompted by envy. It would be not oversimplifying the situation to suggest that

nowadays, when teams work with one of the "great names", they are predisposed to work in ways that can be much harder to initiate in other circumstances.

Moreover, she believes that asking individuals to do profound levels of self-reflection in a large group context is asking a great deal, and she restricts learning sets for this purpose to not more than four to six people. Some work – for some individuals – can only happen on a one-to-one basis.

Her view would be that in individual self-reflection, learning and change, there are no easy short-cuts when we are dealing with the personal scripts which we value as profoundly as we value our own skins, and when we are profoundly "stuck" in some part of the Gestalt cycle or in one of Argyris' defensive routines.

It is this writer's observation and experience that when people are invited to review and possibly change their personal scripts – including their preferred ways of viewing the world – it is not helpful to assume that emotions are not, and do not need to be implicated, to some level at least. She does not experience Schein's (1993) apparent comfort in separating out cognitive and emotional process and experience. Many of those who work with this writer will seek her out to work privately, away from a larger group, when they fear a loss of face in acknowledging fear, uncertainty, pain or grief. Many will take the risk of acknowledging and sharing their emotional reaction – whatever its level – with others in their learning team, at the time that they experience it. Very, very few, in her experience, could honestly say that the exploration of self is a purely cognitive experience, with no emotional content. Self is, after all, often our most closely guarded possession, though we may defend and guard it with an intensity and in ways of which we are not fully aware.

Nonetheless, the excursion into the thinking of Isaacs and Schein was stimulating and extending. It forced this writer to critique her thinking and practice, and to think more

deeply about the ways in which anxiety and uncertainty is contained and managed when people are engaging in self-reflection of any kind – whether that "self" is the group or the individual. Isaac's discussion of containers is particularly interesting in that respect.

This writer is also conscious of the importance of helping the group to develop the sort of containers (for anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity) which Isaacs describes, to make the task manageable. She believes that in her own practice, she has become effective at helping a group of individuals to quickly develop confidence in their collective and individual capacity to manage and constructively work with any kind of data that they generate, including strong emotional content.

Ultimately, it is by the management of such containers that any kind of process work becomes possible. In the writer's experience, processing the process work of a group is probably the hardest thing of all to do well and if setting some groundlines at the start helps, then it surely will be a lot easier than what Schein sounds as if he experienced in sensitivity training groups, where "anything goes".

Chapter 6: Summary and evaluation

In this final chapter, the writer attempts to summarise the outcomes of the thesis work and to evaluate the contribution which these make to collective knowledge and practice.

Before doing any of these things, it is perhaps helpful to summarise for the reader the central research issues which have been the subject of the thesis, and the major outcomes sought.

The central issues were:

- how and why does reflection help us to develop our understanding of ourselves in ways that help us to learn?

- what practical reflective techniques work?

- how do our tacit or implicit "theories" about ourselves guide our behaviour, and does it help to make our implicit theories (Argyris & Schon, 1978) explicit?

- how can the practitioner – the educator or facilitator of learning in others – use reflection to understand and develop his or her own practice, with its suite of acknowledged and unacknowledged "theories" or mental models (Senge, 1990), and to effectively integrate these themes with practice?

- and how does the researcher tap into, make use of, test and perhaps refine the stock of existing theory and knowledge?

The outcomes sought by consideration of these issues were:

- review and refinement of some of the theoretical constructs used by the writer and other theorists and practitioners of reflection-based learning;

- enhancement of the practical reflection-based techniques used by the writer to facilitate the development of managers;

- documentation of a case-study in which reflective techniques were themselves applied to the development of the writer's personal praxis as she attempts to integrate her conceptual understanding and practical application of reflection.

Consistent with these intended outcomes, this chapter is organised around the following headings:

How and why reflection assists behavioural change: summary and reflections on the writer's contribution to "sense making" or theoretical understanding;

Tools of the trade: summary and reflections on the writer's contribution to practice;

The reflective stance in praxis development: summary and reflections on how this case study throws light on the development of personal praxis;

Reflections on the research: an evaluation of the contribution made by documenting an individual self-reflective case study.

How and why reflection assists behavioural change: summary and reflections on the writer's contribution to "sense making" or theoretical understanding

One of the major intentions of this thesis has been to describe the development of a certain area of the writer's praxis – that concerned with using reflection to help define

and articulate areas of self which are implicated in the application of skills and learning in areas critical to the effective practice of the individual. The subject of such reflection could be one's own self or that of another person.

The point of theoretical understanding reached by the writer as to how and why reflection assist behavioural change was described in some detail in Chapter 5 (see especially 268 - 274, 279 - 285, and 294 - 296). In summary, she sees the practitioner as striving to create a situation in which the subject of reflection – self or other – can make sense of self in a way which will result in achievable and helpful behavioural change. She has described one way in which that situation can be created: by paying attention to the data which is being generated by the other person (if working with another), by one's own self and by the interaction between both people. These data are organised into Gestalten, in which salient features of the figure stand out from the ground and are surfaced or brought into the awareness of both parties in ways which both make sense, can be accepted and which trigger insight into how the self is characteristically operating – for better or worse. That insight can be of a quality which generates acknowledgment, acceptance, respect and caring for self and at the same time a profound sense of the possibilities for productive change which exists within the self. It is argued that at the moment of insight, the self is already changed – it has been re-invented or re-framed – to use Freeman's (1993) term – in a way that enriches both one's understanding of and experience of self.

This is a very brief summary of the output of a process of reading and thinking that went on over a period of years. But to what extent does it represent a useful contribution to the understanding of anyone but the writer herself? Here, then, let the writer set forth her modest claims to being "a useful contributor".

Her first claim would be simply that her description of what is entailed in self reflection - and its facilitation - articulates something which is not easily or commonly captured in

the literature. Although the contemporary management literature makes many direct and indirect references to reflection and its place in learning, this writer contends that there are relatively few attempts to explore what reflection actually requires of those who apply it to themselves and those who facilitate its application.

This writer believes she has made a particular contribution by accessing and integrating strands of thought from different branches of literature and practice, and by testing that thinking in her own practice. In particular, she turned to contemporary literature on research methodology to explore the reflective stance of critical subjectivity or knowingness, and found that it had been thought about, in that context, in ways that are not acknowledged or integrated with the management development literature. As Chapter 2 of this thesis suggests researchers for some time have been wrestling with the practical, as well as the epistemological, implications of the need to "stand aside" from oneself in order to "see" oneself.

Similarly, she found that she had to go back to the counselling literature of twenty or more years ago to find serious attempts to describe and explain what is going when human beings reflect upon themselves. And unless contemporary development practitioners have had the benefit of being trained in counselling (or have accessed that literature for some other reason) this writer believes there is not much in the current literature on the learning organisation to encourage them to look that far back, or in that particular place. In fact, Schein's (1993) comments - which were so vigorously explored in Chapter 5 - would positively dissuade them from doing any such thing.

Arguably, even Schon's (1987) work on the reflective practitioner is relatively silent on the nature of the reflective act itself though he certainly acknowledges the challenge of articulating knowledge-in-action.

So, then, a claim can be made for having explored and captured in words a very

complex set of ideas and actions that are undoubtedly part of the repertoire of a great many practitioners, but which few have put on paper in this way.

A second claim would be that in her treatment of reflection, this writer has challenged a view of the world that suggests that reflection is essentially a cognitive act, one that is divorced from emotional dialogue (with self or others) and happens in a cool container of suspended judgement and logic. This writer conceives of critical subjectivity as being a state of knowingness about self which does not limit or rule out any of the data, whether generated by brain or heart, but which does require a capacity to alternate closeness and distance from self, including full engagement with and detachment from, the emotional self. The person who would facilitate that kind of reflection is not one, in this writer's view, who can rely on the application of logic, or force of their own personality or reputation. Rather, as described in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis, it is an act of much greater complexity, requiring a commitment to, awareness of and acceptance of both self and the other person which incorporates all facets of human experiencing - intellectual, emotional, physical and intuitive. Hopefully, this wholistic understanding of reflection has been successfully captured throughout the thesis.

A third claim would be that this thesis takes the notion of reflection and views it through a number of different lenses - the lens of reflection in research, of reflection in learning and, to a lesser extent, of reflection in the development of one's self-hood. So far as the writer is aware, a comprehensive treatment of the subject in this way, in one place, has not been undertaken previously.

Like a great deal of reflection on self, the writer has difficulty making an objective evaluation of her efforts as a "theorist" or "sense-maker". These pages bear testimony to the fact that sense-making – with the help and advice of others in the literature and in person – has been a very important ingredient in crystallising her efforts in practice. As acknowledged earlier, the writer has a great need for sense-making and this has been a

powerful driver for her to operationalise or articulate her own or others' tacit "knowing-in-action",

There have been times, as in Chapter 2, when the writer set herself the task of engaging systematically with a body of literature which contained elements which were unfamiliar, unappealing and complex, as well as elements which were exciting, familiar and attractive. In that chapter, the literature can be said to have been "reviewed" in the more traditional sense of that word – that is, an attempt has been made to weigh up the literature, to see what it has to offer, and to put one view in the context of another, contrasting view.

In the third chapter, accessing of the literature was more pragmatically driven by the interests of the writer and those with whom she came into contact. The literature was used in a very deliberate way to inform, guide, enhance and make sense of experience. This use of literature in the development of understanding and theory is much closer to what one would associate with the development of praxis: messy, unsystematic and needs driven.

In the context of researching herself and offering this account as a case-study in self-reflection on personal development, this writer has had a need, however, to try to surface the way her thinking and theory developed, and how the literature and experience shaped that process. She is conscious that this attempt at mapping the development of her thinking has been incomplete. Of necessity, she has selected from among the data banks generated by over six years of praxis development.

This is true not only of the data of practical experience, but also the data contained in the literature. For example, the writer has made only a fleeting reference to the work of Carl Jung (for example, Jung, 1933) but has had, and continues to have, her understanding of selfhood and the process of reflection on self immeasurably enriched

by the thinking of one of the great minds of our century.

Another body of literature which attracted this writer, though in no sense can she claim to have reviewed it systematically, is that concerned with the development of our understanding of the concept of "selfhood". How our awareness and concept of our own "selfhood" is created; how our image of ourselves changes over time; how we engage in self-dialogue and "self-talk" without necessarily being fully aware of the messages being given and received; and how we develop, or avoid, deeper insight into our selves (of the kind that would be associated with "third position" reflection). Freeman (1993), for example, offers a highly sophisticated and stimulating exploration of the processes by which we continually re-invent and re-write ourselves.

This sort of literature has certainly extended and enriched the present writer's thinking about selfhood and how to explore self in ways that are helpful in opening up possibilities for constructive learning and change. Further, more systematic exploration of such literature – and the practice it generates – is the most likely future direction for her own continuing praxis development.

Perhaps one other way of evaluating one's effort is to ask: would you do anything differently next time? When it comes to developing her understanding and theory, this writer can only say: "no, this is the way it has to happen for me, at least at this stage in my life." It wasn't always easy, but it was always interesting, always stimulating and at times, the act of sense-making in cognitive terms can only be described a "peak experience" which was exhilarating and highly motivating (as in, "I can't wait to translate this into action").

Tools of the trade: summary and reflections of the writer's contribution to practice

In this section, the writer reviews some of the specific techniques she uses to assist the

process of reflection when working with others – whether one-to-one or in small groups (usually not more than twenty in size). These techniques need to be put in the context of the writer's general approach which was summarised in the previous section of this chapter.

a) The general tools of helping

In order to enter into the kind of dialogue which facilitates deep levels of self-reflection, the present writer uses tools of "helping" or facilitating inspired by the work of Rogers (1981), Carkhuff (1969) and Egan (1974). The rationale for using these tools has been offered in the previous section: namely, that reflection on self is, by definition, an intensely personal and intimate act - one that needs to be approached with tools best fitted to that purpose. This writer believes she has made a significant contribution simply by revisiting, rearticulating and systematically sharing with others a body of professional practice and literature that seems strangely neglected in major, contemporary treatments of reflection as a tool for personal development and behavioural change. Her use of the counselling literature has been an attempt to describe and make explicit skills in helping which are too often tacit and the subject of "knowing-in-action". Her intention has been to ensure that these skills can be operationalised, discussed, taught and learned like anything else, without the elements of mystery and magic often associated with the gurus of the profession.

For example, Carkhuff's (1969) description of the individual undergoing self-exploration is remarkably similar to the processes of action research and action learning which have been described in many places during this thesis. Like Rogers he identifies stages in the process:

- at first, a minimal translation of the helpee's exploration into self-understanding;
- the development of some direction, however tentative, based upon the minimal understanding;

- acting upon this directionality;
- incorporating the feedback from the action;
- reflecting back upon prior understanding and sharpening earlier discriminations;
- acting more constructively based upon finer and more sensitive understanding (Carkhuff, 1969, p47).

The present writer has developed her own statement of the helping skills which is offered to those with whom she works in order to explain and share the skills involved.

In summary, she sees those skills as including:

- the suspension of judgement, advice-giving and blaming;
- the communication of respect and positive regard, which is very rarely totally unconditional, but includes the communication of the following messages, in order:
  - with me you are free to be who you are;
  - you are worthy of my effort to understand;
  - I genuinely believe that you can do better in your understanding of yourself, but this needs to happen at a manageable and helpful pace, which you, ultimately, control;
- *attending* behaviour of the kind described in the previous chapter, which consists of tuning into data arising from the self, the other and the interaction between self and other;

- *active listening* involving *acknowledgment* of the other's messages (both verbal and non-verbal), *reflection* back of those messages in some way to let the other know that they have been heard, and *summarising* or *crystallising* the essence of what is being communicated by the other in an attempt to clarify meaning;

- *acknowledgment of* and *sense-making of one's own internal data* and how this is affecting one's behaviour;

- *genuineness, authenticity* and *congruence* (absence of significant gaps or discrepancies between how the facilitator experiences the other person and the way in which they are engaging with them; for example, not deliberately expressing enormous pleasure at working with someone who is actually experienced as challenging and difficult);

- *appropriate self-disclosure* (this is not the same as dumping your "left-hand" column on someone, but is a preparedness to acknowledge and share things about one's own experience that might be helpful to the other person; it is a reaction to the concept of the faceless therapist who offers little or nothing of themselves);

- increasing *focus* in the process of adding value to the other person's attempts to interpret or make sense of their experience; this happens in three ways:

    - through being increasingly *concrete* and specific about the *content* of what is being communicated and explored (making what is tacit about the substance more explicit);

    - by the *incremental addition of meaning* to what has been acknowledged

or recognised by the other person (adding another layer of meaning, but not in a way that the other person cannot understand or rejects out of hand);

- by being *immediate* about the *process* which is going on between the facilitator and the other person, if that process is being blocked by either party or seems in some way to be a microcosm of the whole problem or issue or script being explored by the other person; immediacy is meta-communication: communication about the communication;

- *constructive confrontation* which is achieved by helpfully:

  - offering additional data or perspectives on the issue at hand;

  - reframing the issue (for example, through metaphor);

  - feeding back observed discrepancies between the other person's insights and their actions or behaviour; their actual self and the expressed ideal of self, the other person's experience of themselves and the facilitator's experience of them.

These skills have been listed in ascending order, not of difficulty (the first ones are actually the hardest for many people, including the present writer), but of application. This is not a list which is intended to explore the concepts in detail, but to give an indication of what, in the writer's view, is potentially required of those who seek to work helpfully in the development of self-insight through enhancing self-reflection.

b) Containers

Like Isaacs (1993) and Schein (1993) this writer has had to find ways to helpfully operationalise and make accessible for deep reflection a territory that many adults find potentially threatening – in other words, to find "containers" for the anxiety and ambiguity with which the process is often associated. She mentioned in the previous chapter that one way of making this kind of reflection more accessible is to represent it as a piece of work, a task, a job at hand, another aspect of continuous practice improvement. Figure 5 provides a way of mapping the potential of the work that might be done.

This diagram was developed in collaboration with a colleague and came to be called "the diagnostic pyramid". It is perhaps helpful to say a little more about its development. Like the concept of "personal scripts" (see Chapter 3) its development was very pragmatic and – again, like the personal scripts – it was triggered by work being done in relation to systems thinking, specifically the work of Senge (1990). Senge uses a pyramid to represent the connection between surface events and perceived problems (at the top of the pyramid) and the generative structures (archetypes) which trigger them (represented at the bottom of the pyramid).

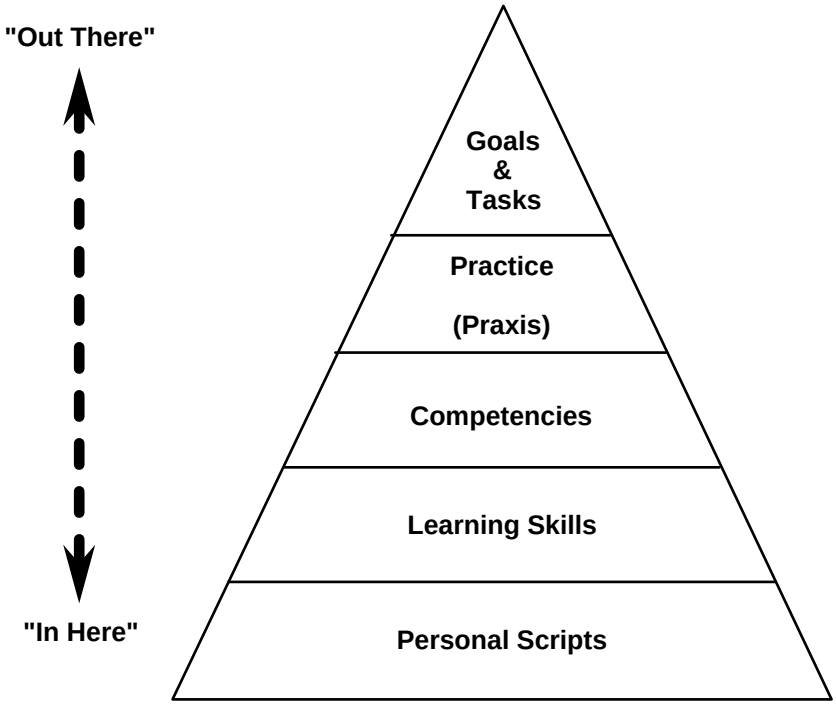
The pyramid offers a simple, graphic way to make the connection between the tasks and issues with which an individual needs to engage "out there" in the world and the self which the person brings to that work.

The data at all levels of the pyramid are portrayed as legitimate and helpful avenues to reflection.

Although developed in a pragmatic way, it should be noted that there is a nice similarity between the levels of progressive reflection set out in the pyramid and the progression of reflection from "object to subject" described in Rogers (1961) and set out earlier in this chapter.

In offering this to others, this practitioner suggests that the greatest leverage – in terms of the greatest return for effort – comes as one goes to the bottom of the pyramid, where insight can yield great potential gains in terms of choices, options and possibilities for learning, change and action.

Levels Of Diagnosis And Learning



Goals and Tasks:	Your insight into what needs to be done. The things you need to do to achieve desired changes or outcomes.
Practice:	The methods or strategies you use to accomplish your tasks (your "praxis")
Competencies:	The personal qualities and abilities you need for successful implementation of your practice
Learning Skills:	The way you learn new competencies and develop existing ones
Personal Scripts:	The characteristic ways you do things which both help and hinder your success at all of the above

Figure 5: Mapping the possibilities of continuous practice improvement

(Developed in collaboration with James Ford)

The other(s) to whom this is offered have freedom to choose where on the pyramid they

will work, and many choose to start by clarifying the work which faces them in the outside world (represented at the top of the pyramid). Indeed, this is important work in its own right, since not all knowledge and insight come from reflecting upon self. We need to attend closely to the data the world presents us with, make our own sense of it and compare that with the sense which others make. Sometimes – often, even – careful assessment of the wood suggests the direction of the wood-carver's action, without any obvious, conscious engagement with the wood-cutter's own vision. In any event, often managers have been equipped with many tools and devices for developing their understanding of the tasks and environments which they face, and diligent application of those tools and devices produces results.

Sometimes, the task is so challenging in its complexity and unfamiliarity that the manager or other practitioner must think quite self-consciously about the choice of tools, and their repertoire or tool kit. Sometimes they find gaps in the kit and make decisions to develop their "strategic thinking" kit or their "knowledge of the balance sheet". In any event at this, the next level of the pyramid, the challenge is to look at what one has available and to ask questions, in praxis development, about "why you do what you do; why use this tool rather than this?; is there anything else that might be fitter for the purpose?"

Some managers find that questions about their praxis raise further questions about their competencies (the personal qualities and abilities needed for successful implementation of their praxis), and about their ability to learn new competencies or enhance existing ones. And some find their way to the bottom of the pyramid, by accident or design, engaging in exploration of the personal scripts which provide the foundation (in terms of both energy and frameworks) on which all the rest is built.

This map, crude though it is, if offered as a way of both objectifying, legitimising and making accessible the layers of work which might be tackled. Its strength, in practice,

is its simplicity: it offers a fairly straightforward way of orienting oneself, finding one's way around the territory of the self. It is offered here because it has become such a commonly used part of the writer's own "tool kit" that it orients her own thinking about self, and has therefore possibly "leaked", without being acknowledged or declared, into the pages of this thesis.

When working with individuals in the context of a large group (i.e. more than sixteen individuals), this writer normally makes it clear to the group that it is helpful to model the process of working through the diagnostic pyramid. There are two reasons for this: to illustrate the kinds of issues that might be accessed at each level of the pyramid, and to demonstrate the facilitation skills involved, so that the participants, working in smaller learning sets, can work through the process themselves. The process is modelled in a way that carefully respects the privacy of the individuals concerned (lots of checking along the way that it is okay to proceed) and involves frequent "stopping the tape" and discussion with other members of the group ("What do you think the issue here might be?"). In this way, the task is "objectified" for demonstration purposes and made less mysterious and threatening.

It is worth mentioning at this point that "diagnosis" of a personal script that is worth taking developmental action on can take anything from an hour (unusual) to a week (in real time). Usually, that week is spread over some months, although the opportunity to participate in an intensive residential program can accelerate that time.

It is the management of the "containers" that leads this writer to differentiate her work in management and development from that of the therapist. Although she does engage in private counselling and therapeutic work, the work undertaken in management programs, working with the pyramid (which, by the way, is never offered in the context of private counselling sessions where the person has specified in advance that they are "coming for counselling"), is observably different. There the containers are more in

evidence, more overtly discussed and directly acknowledged, and deliberately used to manage and limit the potential for anxiety. As the work continues, and the level of trust and skill in managing the process is better developed among participants, people may engage in what amounts to therapeutic work with another, and with the facilitator. By then, the containers are not needed to the same extent. But by the same token, they are never far away if needed: "maybe this is something you'd like to pursue privately with Nita", "don't let us stray over the line on this one", "tell us when you want us to back off", are all ways in which members of the group signal to one another that "safety" is not far away.

There are many other tools and techniques this practitioner uses to facilitate reflection, including Senge's (1990) "ladder of inference" for surfacing and testing assumptions and other aspects of mental models, and Argyris' (1991) "left and right hand column" exercise for surfacing defensive routines. The "diagnostic pyramid", however, and the notion of "personal scripts" which was described in Chapters 3 and 4 and alluded to at intervals since, are two that have some element of originality – although, as someone once sagely observed – there is nothing new under the sun.

c) Structured interactive dialogue

In order to develop the skills of attending, active listening, immediacy and constructive confrontation described earlier, the writer – at times with the assistance of others and at times working and thinking alone – has also developed her use of what she has called structured interactive dialogue in the way illustrated towards the end of the previous chapter. She believes that this interactive experiential reflection is very helpful if insight into the self is to gain the kind of critical self-knowing associated with sustained "third position" reflection.

She had found, however, that willingness to participate in this process – and effective

use of it – is heightened if individuals are offered some frameworks which are intended to make sense of the process, and some techniques which support it. The need for sense-making has been a major stimulus to this writer to "operationalise" or articulate the tacit knowledge behind the technique: she has not been content just to say "watch me" or "have a go" and acquire knowledge in action. While these are important and useful aspects of the learning process, she believes – for all the reasons set out in the previous sections of this chapter, that translating tacit skill or knowledge into explicit words injects new power into the learning process.

For example, it helps if individuals are overtly and deliberately offered the "diagnostic pyramid" described in the previous section of this chapter, and the description of "personal scripts" contained in Chapters 3 and 4.

Before engaging in interactive role-play, the writer would offer – or for preference, encourage the group to develop – some descriptions of key skills involved in the process, such as attending and active listening. As the role-play continues, the writer will sometimes "stop the tape" (i.e. the action) and ask participants to quite specifically reflect on how they are feeling, what they are thinking and how they are experiencing the other person and their interaction with each other. Private reflection of this kind is often followed by immediate sharing and processing of the data generated by the reflection. This means that the writer is sometimes taking the risk of deliberately triggering third position reflection in the midst of the action. If she herself is part of the action, then she must do what she asks the others to do. If "doubling" is involved, then those doubling participate in the same reflective process.

This is a very intensive technique and usually generates self-insight not only for the person who is its subject, but for all those engaged in the process. It is not a technique, however, which the writer would use unless there was a reasonably high degree of trust in the group and/or a commitment to take the risk of working together in this way. It

also requires that the facilitator who initiates the action is prepared to engage in and model the process herself, thereby building the confidence of others in the integrity of the process, as well as demonstrating some of the skills involved.

d) Story-telling

Sometimes the writer does not use structured interactive dialogue at all, but uses something a bit more "low key" in which individuals are invited to reflect on "critical" incidents by writing about them or telling the story of the event. The event could be one which occurred sometime in the past, in another place, or it could have occurred very recently (for example, in the context of some experiential activity or task that was part of the immediate learning context, such as a workshop). Sometimes, of course, story telling and story writing occur quite spontaneously in the course of interaction and journal keeping or diary work, and the stories are formed without prompting from anyone else. Sometimes, the writer will offer some quite specific triggers to structure the telling of the story: what happened? what did you say, feel or think? what were others doing or saying? what do you think was the impact of your behaviour on them? of theirs on you? what outcomes were generated? were you satisfied with them? is there anything you would do differently next time?

When the stories are told or read (sometimes people are invited to share copies of diary extracts with others), others in the group are invited to reflect back to the person anything that strikes them about the story itself or the way it was told (the language, non-verbal cues if it was spoken, pauses, and so on). The invitation is couched as, "what did you hear/read in the story or its telling?" Sometimes the story teller is invited to tell the story again – and each time, the story is told with the addition of detail and meaning which were not contained in the first telling.

Working in this way, the story teller and those hearing or reacting to the story start to

notice the mental models, assumptions and other aspects of the personal scripts that are suggested by the story. The facilitator (the writer or a colleague) will sometimes lead the conversation at the outset, to model the kinds of listening and reflection which might be helpful, and then take a much less interventionist role as the story telling continues. Often as the skill and confidence of the participants in working with the process grow, there is little intervention from the facilitator. To quote Peter Senge during a session he ran at a seminar held in Melbourne in August 1994 (attended by this writer), "we talk and we talk until the talking starts."

There are other specific techniques which this writer occasionally uses to "accelerate" the surfacing of mental models – such as Argyris' (1991) "left and right hand column" technique, described in the previous chapter. She has found, however, that these work best when helping people to reflect on past situations and interactions, rather than ones immediately in train. To resort to asking people to "do a left and right hand column" as a way of getting them to be immediate with each other would be, to her, a sign that she and the group had not successfully created the kind of dialogue in which such disclosure would happen naturally. To suddenly accelerate that process, without first creating the state of readiness described in the previous section, would seem to her to be counter-productive.

When written down like this, it seems such a short list of "reflective techniques". In practice, it is this writer's observation – based on repeated practice of the same basic techniques – that it is these such "simple" things that are so hard to do, and yet so powerful when done well.

<u>The reflective stance in praxis development: summary and reflections on how this case study throws light on the development of personal praxis</u>

Towards the end of Chapter 2, this writer tried to describe the methods used in an effort

to inject some discipline into the process of development of her ideas and her practice. These are the disciplines of reflection associated with articulation (through speaking, drawing or writing; the adoption of the "third position" or the "meta-me" stance; the use of dialogue with others; and the writing and re-writing of the narrative).

When these disciplines are practised regularly, they produce - and hopefully accelerate - the integration of thought and action into praxis. As Chapter 2 also suggested the challenge is to develop a capacity for reflection in the midst of action, an openness to the possibility of learning in any situation and a preparedness to constantly enquire of oneself: what am I doing that seems to be working? what isn't working so well? and what do I need to do differently?

As this writer worked on the development of her praxis, there were two other things which emerged as being particularly important in enhancing that development. One was the need to be able to dialogue with others in a range of ways. Chapter 4 describes her encounters with several people through whom her praxis was significantly developed. These were individuals who were able to stimulate either critical analysis of ideas (as "Alan" was able to do with his Gestalt framework) and/or examination and extension of practice (as "Rebecca" was able to do with her modelling of listening skills). While the stories contained in Chapter 4 attempt to describe the ways in which ideas and practice developed, possibly what they don't reveal explicitly is the kind of openness to experience required of the practitioner-as-learner.

The reality was that the development of praxis documented in this thesis required this writer sometimes to put herself in the hands of others, to ask them to coach her, to "tell" or "teach" her. At all times it required her to cultivate an openness to experience in company with others and to the possibility of learning with and through others. As time went by, she tried to apply to her own learning the qualities of awareness described in Chapter 5 (pp268-272). In other words, the reflective stance was not something she

simply offered or shared with others to enhance their development, but something she needed to be able to do for and with herself, either alone or in company with others.

If the writer were to offer advice to others who are interested in the development of their personal praxis, it would be that "critical subjectivity" or critical "knowingness" about oneself is a continuing process, not an end state or achievement, and that at its best, it requires a capacity - or at least a willingness to try - to be "tuned in" to the data presented by all the internal and external channels of sensation, imagination, feeling and thought. For most people, she contends this represents a major challenge - partly because we are not usually taught how to do this and partly because our preferences and other personal scripts are likely to make it difficult for us to tune into some - or even all - of these channels. Without the help of others, and without tapping into the wisdom contained in the literature, this writer would never have developed the understanding, skill or confidence to apply reflective practice to herself.

The writer believes, therefore, that praxis development in a field like management development which requires the engagement of self in dialogue with others, is not and cannot be an entirely solitary occupation. There comes a time when the data of the interpretation of data offered by another challenges, transcends and transforms the data and understanding of data that the individual is able to generate for him or herself.

The writer noted earlier that there were two things which were particularly important in enhancing her praxis development. In addition to the involvement of others, the writer found that the production of the narrative account - the text of the thesis itself - was a significant catalyst for her learning. Chapter 2 (pp92-105) describes the challenge of writing things in action research, and of the power of oral and written narrative in the creation of meaning, the understanding of self and the transformation of self. Again, without repeating all that has been said before, the writer would like to make the point briefly: that the placing of the symbolism of words and metaphors on experience does

not simply articulate that experience, but changes it, potentially enriching it or limiting and diminishing it.

In the sustained narrative of the thesis, what was being transformed were the writer's mental models - and not simply her mental models about "how to do reflection" but her mental models about herself and what blocks her from reaching and maintaining the reflective stance in relation to herself, as well as in relation to others. In truth, she "met herself" both in action and on the written page. And in encountering herself, in understanding herself as she is, she has already - in the paradoxical terms of the Gestalt model of change - begun to change and enrich that self.

If this were to translate into advice for others, the advice would be: take the trouble to articulate your understanding and your practice, take the trouble to write down, or draw or tape record what you know of yourself, and read or listen to what you have written or said. While one doesn't have to write a thesis to gain value from this process, it is the writer's observation that some form of sustained narrative is more effective than the sporadic documentation of isolated, or individual events and insights. For example, it can be helpful to re-read a series of journal entries made over a few weeks and to attempt to summarise the thoughts and feelings which are triggered by the process of re-reading.

In the writer's experience there are other tools that are helpful in enhancing praxis development, although in re-reading the narrative of this thesis, the writer is conscious that this has been a very imperfect attempt to describe the way in which theory and practice came together to inform and enrich one another. The process of integration was much messier that this account suggests, moving forward and backward and forward again in jerky steps rather than in a continuous and well-orchestrated process of continual testing and refinement. There were months – years even, in the case of her use of the counselling literature – when the writer literally "forgot" the theory and kept

re-inventing understanding based solely on the basis of practice, and other people's words.

The importance of the concept of praxis was never far from her mind, however, once she began leading the Master of Business in Management program for RMIT. She wanted to "operationalise" this concept so that managers would have some methods for surfacing and refining their own practice as managers. Focussing, in these groups, on the realms of management and consulting, she would offer some "questions about your praxis" and invite the managers and consultants to not simply answer them but invent their own questions. Examples of such questions would be:

- when you take on the role of "leader" or "consultant", what do you think you intend to do in working with your team or client?

- how do you or would you represent it to them?

- how do you or will you define your responsibility to them?

- how interested and committed are you to the work you undertake as "leader" or "consultant"?

- how is the experience changing you?

- how do or will you manage anxiety, ambiguity, uncertainty, conflict or debate in the course of your work with that team or client?

- what counts as relevant data for you in making sense of situations or solving problems?

- how much data do you need?

- why do you do any of the things you do? do you know why?

- does anyone else do it the way you do?

- how do you know?

- is their reason for doing it the same as yours?

- how do you evaluate what you do?

Most – if not all – of these questions (or some variation of them) would be relevant to many other occupations (for "leader" substitute "accountant", "plumber", "hairdresser").

The writer is conscious that in respect of her use of the techniques of reflection in research, practice and learning, she has answered a good many of these questions in this thesis. But she has not answered all of them. For example, she has not said anything about the kind of responsibility she feels towards her clients and colleagues while working with them in the ways described. Many of the values and assumptions implicit in these methods are not difficult to articulate: respect for others' wisdom and integrity, unless seriously damaged by the lack of it; commitment to working with people not "on" them; and a belief in the capacity of most human beings to work through situations which are problematic and challenging for them, given space and encouragement. To reflect only on these things, however, would be to evade some harder questions: does your need to be seen to be competent ever lead you to define your responsibility to your clients in ways that limit your individual and collective freedom to think and act? if your client has got a serious and urgent problem which others readily experience but he/she won't acknowledge, how long do you let the process of interactive dialogue take

its natural course? precisely when and how would you accelerate it? how does the very concept of feeling "responsibility" toward someone or something start to shape the kind of reflective processes you will engage in together?

The writer does have some tentative answers to these questions, even though they have not been stated in this thesis. The point to be made here, is that such questions demonstrate the power of self-reflective praxis development. In theory, it would be possible to develop praxis by reflecting on one's personal theory and one's practice "at arm's length" as it were, as though they were things separate from oneself, as in: "I will do x rather than y because the books say to do it that way." Self-reflective praxis development requires one to go further by coming close to oneself: "Why am *I* so attracted to x rather than y?" "Why have I chosen to read that book and not another?" In this process, the self is acknowledged by the self as fully involved in – and responsible for – the process of selecting and integrating theory and practice.

Imperfect though it may have been, this case-study in the development of one aspect of praxis, the writer believes, has at the very least demonstrated the potential of the technique of systematic self-reflection in enhancing praxis development.

In this instance, the self-reflective development of praxis was achieved in a particular way – by engaging in self-reflective dialogue and practice with others, and through the use of narrative (the act of writing the thesis) as a reflective device. The reader needs to bear in mind that this particular study has also been a research exercise: a case of reflecting on the use of self-reflection to develop praxis! From that perspective, self-reflective dialogue and narrative were also research tools used to generate data. Their use as a means of praxis development and as research tools are closely related, however, and so are addressed together in the next – and last – section of this chapter.

<u>Reflections on the research: an evaluation of the contribution made by documenting an</u>

individual self-reflective case study

This is perhaps the hardest part of the chapter to write. Following the advice of Zuber-Skerritt (1992) this reflection needs to take the form of evaluation, focussed on four critical questions: Was the research method fit for the purpose? In her dialogue with others and in the production of narrative, did the researcher maintain the necessary "critical attitude" (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992), "critical knowing or critical subjectivity" (Reason, 1988)? How has the research methodology affected or changed the researcher? Is the data useful to anyone else?

In answering all of these questions, the writer is necessarily striving to achieve and maintain that "critical attitude" but is conscious of the fact that the written account bears its own testimony and response to the questions. The reader will undoubtedly form his or her own view of all of them.

Was the research method fit for the purpose? The conceptual justification for the method is contained in Chapter 3, and won't be repeated, or even summarised here. The evaluation undertaken here is based on the experience of having done it, and having reflected on the doing of it. To research the development of one's own theory and practice, and the combination of those two things into praxis, has produced a level of concentration and analysis during that process which has profoundly changed it. The development would not have proceeded in the way it has if it was not the subject of research. It is not simply that the researcher has been more deliberately self-conscious and self-reflective – she believes that the capacity for "meta-me" reflection is so much a part of her learning practice that reflection of that kind would have become a "way of life" in any event. The effort of being "researcher" and not just a "learner" has produced a different kind of difference, summed up in these words: "the research literature". This writer would never, operating simply as a "learner", set herself the task of discovering what the research literature had to say about reflection in the context of

research. Without that discovery, the writer's understanding of the concept would not have been honed to the point it has, since, in her view, the research literature has far more to say about what is involved in reflection – and particularly reflection upon the self – than does the literature relating to individual and organisational learning.

A critical part of the research process has been the use of narrative – in many forms – to help the researcher develop a capacity for "critical subjectivity". To see one's own words on the page is to meet oneself, with one's mental models revealed. At the same time, the development of the narrative (and particularly the writing of the thesis itself), has been used to crystallise and enhance the researcher's own sense-making, as she developed her "theory" about why and how reflection works. Working from diaries and case files, the researcher has tried, in Chapter 4, to give an accurate account of how her thinking and practice developed. Inevitably, however, she is thinking backwards, seeing things in retrospect and unable to capture fully the person who started out on the journey.

Which leads into the question of how the research methodology has affected or changed the researcher. In an unusual and insightful book *Rewriting the Self*, Mark Freeman (1993) explores the relationship between history, memory and narrative in the development of our self-understanding – literally, the sense we make of ourselves.

> For what I have come to believe is that there is no more appropriate or exciting arena for understanding what hermeneutic inquiry is – as concerns both its possibilities and its problems – than the exploration of that most unusual and elusive being we call the "self" ... Why is this so? When we try to interpret something outside of ourselves, be it a text or a painting or a person, there is something *there* before us; words or splashes of paint or actions. But what really is *there* when the object of our interpretive endeavours is ourselves? Our pasts, you might answer, the history of our words and deeds. But are these pasts, these histories, suitably compared to that which exists outside ourselves? They are *our* pasts, *our* histories, and are in that sense inseparable from who is doing the interpreting, namely ourselves: subject and object are one. We are thus interpreting precisely that which, in some sense, we ourselves have fashioned through our own reflective imagination (Freeman, 1993, p5).

Freeman's book includes a detailed examination of the relationship between "living" and "telling" – that is, between life as we experience it moment to moment, and the stories we subsequently tell about it. One can debate whether there is something significantly fictional about the tales we ultimately tell. For some (for example, White, 1978) stories about life are a large step away from life itself and should not be confused with it; for others (for example, MacIntyre, 1981) the disjunction is not so great, since even the stories we tell, and the act of telling them, is a part of living itself.

The basic question, as seen by Freeman, is: do narratives by virtue of being told or written at a significant remove from the flux of immediate experience, inevitably falsify life itself? He argues that, even if we do not live narratives of the same nature and scope as those we tell when we reflect on the past, the very act of making sense of ourselves and others is only possible in and through the fabric of narrative itself. Through narrative (whether spoken or written), he suggests, we have the means to engage in the kind of liberation of thinking important to those who originally developed the concept of action research (see Chapter 2). Through narrative, he suggests, we are able to step beyond the socially constructed nature of ourselves, and:

> undergo the transformation from a kind of object, prey to the constructive forces of society and culture, to a wilful subject, able both to put into question those narratives assumed to be given and to transform in turn the sociocultural surround itself... Why might this be important? As Bakhtin (1986, p139) has written, "The better a person understands the degree to which he is externally determined, the closer he comes to understanding and exercising his real freedom..." When does this sort of thing happen? Among other occasions, it happens, Bakhtin goes on to note, whenever there is any "serious and probing" attempt at self-understanding – whenever, that is, one seeks to rewrite the self (Freeman, 1993, pp23-24).

In surfacing some of her own personal scripts – through dialogue with others and through narrative – this writer believes that she has re-written or re-invented a part of herself. To engage in the kind of attending behaviour described previously – in which one is open to and reflecting upon the data which comes from inside oneself, as well as the data generated by other people and their interaction with oneself – requires a

capacity to liberate oneself from oneself at critical moments. This has meant, for me, among other things, an ability to step aside from the script which calls for immediate, demonstrable competence in the eyes of self and others – and all its subtle manifestations. While I might not be able to eliminate the raw material of the script itself, I can observe it in operation and put it on hold for long enough to treat it like anything else: another piece of data, not an inevitable driver of behaviour.

As to the value of the research activity to others, its value lies in its products: the development of understanding – which has been shared in these pages; and the development of practice – which can only be shared with others in the instant of dialogue. In a practical sense I believe I have made a difference to people if I can help them to usefully re-connect with past experience which has somehow become fragmented and disassociated from their current picture or sense of themselves, and to which they now attach meanings that in some ways limit or even undermine their current capacity to create options and make responsible choices relating to their present behaviour. An example of this would be a person who believes that although they had a hard time of it with their previous boss, the current boss is much easier to relate to and, "it's a whole new scene, nothing like the past." Close attention to what the person actually says and does, however, suggests that they see the previous boss as being unusual and unreasonable, whose arbitrary-seeming behaviour had nothing to do with their own behaviour and personal scripts – scripts which are tolerated by or which match those of the current supervisor, but which are likely again to be dysfunctional when the next boss comes along. The crucial task here is not to uncover or piece together or excavate the past, to understand it per se, or to become a victim of it, but to use the way one thinks and feels about past experience as a source of help in understanding (and possibly changing) the way one learns or relates to others in the present.

What is interesting and important, in this work, is not whether what we remember of the

past is true, but the nature of our current retrospective understanding of it. In this sense, the lessons we learn from the past are ones we teach to ourselves in the present, not lessons which are inevitably inflicted on us by that past. When we are engaged in telling stories about past experience, we are engaged in a process of reconstructing the past, in which we literally re-invent it. How the story is told, the language used and the non-verbal behaviour displayed might be as revealing as the substance of the story. Both kinds of data tell us what the person is doing in the here-and-now, in terms of personal scripts and can be as revealing of the present as of the past.

As we structure the past, using the mental models of the present (and seeing it, sometimes, against the horizon of an imagined future), we meet what we believe we are, not what we were. As our current understanding of self becomes richer in perspective and deeper in insight, so we might enrich the past, dialoguing with our reconstruction of it in ways that heighten both our respect for it, and our compassion for it, and thus for ourselves. In thinking about former protagonists, about our parents, about situations which seem fraught with difficulty and distress at the time, and which we dread to meet again, we might start to understand them in a different way; to see parents, for example, as "harried, well-intentioned individuals struggling with the same overwhelming facts of the human condition that one faces oneself" (words quoted over morning tea by an unknown participant at a large scale management symposium, but unattributed and of unknown source). Compassionate regard for the past, based on insight developed in the present, can in turn bring back into the present insight and possibilities for action that were not in existence before the excursion into the past was made.

The excursion of the last six years has brought new insight, for me, to words I had been familiar with for some time and which were quoted at the beginning of this thesis: "Life is not just the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know" (Milner, 1936).

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